

The Poetic Development of Langston Hughes

The Poetic Development of Langston Hughes is gradual in terms of the treatment of theme and the handling of art, technique and style. Behind this gradual process of his poetic development, there are several influences that impelled him to devote himself to writing poetry based not on imagination or emotion only but on his direct and indirect experiences of the social, political, cultural, spiritual and emotion black America. His wide - travels to France, Italy, Spain etc. had also enriched his poetic mind and proved conducive to the improvement of his faculty to deal with or embody his experiences concretely in his poetry. Besides, contemporary political situations, racial discrimination in terms of social and religious rights and contemporary black poets like Paul Lawrence Dunbar, James Whitcomb Riley, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, W.E. Braithwaite, Sterling Brown, Lindsay, Sandburg contributed greatly to his development as a poet. He garnered up the experiences of several activities and mixed freely with people of various strata of the European societies. In Mexico, he worked as a teacher of English and stayed there one and a half years. He spent a year at Columbia University and some time as a worker on the high seas. Working as a busboy in Washington. Vachel Lindsay discovered the great poetic genius in him and read several of his poems to a fashionable audience in the

very hotel where Langston Hughes carried trays of dishes.

When Langston Hughes died in 1967, his years of literary productivity had spanned almost half a century. He wrote poetry, drama, fiction etc. putting in words his experiences about racialism that drew a broad line between the White Americans and the black ones. Since the publication of his first poem 'The Negro Speaks of rivers' ⁽¹⁾ in 1921 he had been trying to explore the nooks and crannies of the Black Experience, particularly in its Urban dimensions and this continued without any break upto his last volume of poetry The Panther and the Lash ⁽²⁾ in 1967. "Life in Urban Black America, as typified by Harlem, became for this well-attuned and well-adjusted man of literature, a life of swirling emotion from the fury of violent racial confrontation, death, and murder in the streets, to the subtle nuances of blues singer in the night clubs, to the glory shouting of gospel singers in the storefront churches on Sunday morning" ⁽³⁾.

Like Wilt Whitman, Langston Hughes embarked upon his career as a poet who was quite confident of his power to shed light on the miserable Negro Life. But Whitman celebrated

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1. Published in the June 1921 issue of the Crisis.
 2. Published in the June 1921 issue of the Crisis.
 3. Renaissance and radicalism : 1915-1943 p. 515.

particular self, Hughes celebrated racial, rather than individual self. Hughes tended to avoid celebrating the personal element in his poetry and emphasized the celebration of universal human tendencies embodied in race. He was never willing to introduce the personal element into his poetry. In his "Adventure" ⁽⁴⁾ as a social poet, the poet remarked that his "earliest poems were social poems in that they were about peoples' problems - Whole groups of people's problems - rather than my own personal difficulties." His autobiographical account of the writing of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" conforms this point, and sheds light on the process by which the poet changed personal experiences into archetypal racial memories. The poem had evolved out of personal difficulties with his father, who had migrated to Mexico when the poet was a child, and had not seen his son in over a decade. It is a record of his love of his race. He was recently aware of the spiritual strength of migrant both Nigros and feeling emotionally depressed and dispirited by his estranged parents, and he received melancholy inspiration from the sunset gold upon the Mississippi while crossing by train. Submerging this feeling into that thought of mighty rivers in his ancestral past, he reconciled his isolation in a river like fusion in which history became rebirth, self - justification, and veiled prophecy :

4. Published in the journal 'Pylon' in 1947.

I've known rivers :

I've known rivers ancient as the world and
Older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I build my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to^{sleep}

I looked upon the Nile and raised the Pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe
Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've
seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the
sunset.

I've known rivers :

Ancient dusky rivers

My soul has grown deep like the rivers. (3)

Unexpectedly, Langston Hughes was called by his father to join him in the summer of 1919, hoping to persuade the son to enter into the business world. His father cherished contempt for the country and the race. The confrontation of Hughes with his father over his future vocation led to writing the following : "All day on the train I had been thinking about my father, and his strange dislike of his own people. I did n't understand it, because I was Negro, and I liked Negroes very much."

5. Langston Hughes : The Weary Blues, Published in New York : Knopf, 1926.

As early as 1926, Langston Hughes was recognized by critics as an important literary figure. Du Bois Hayward wrote: "Langston Hughes, although only twenty four years old, is already conspicuous in the group of Negro intellectuals who are dignifying Harlem with a genuine art life It is, however, as an individual poet not as a member of a new and interesting literary group, or as a spokesman for a race that Langston Hughes must stand or fall."

The publication of his first volume of poetry The Weary Blues ensconced him as a Negro poet. Mr. Alain Locke praised him as a true poet of the black masses. In it, Hughes presented the problem of dual-consciousness. In the poems "I am a Negro" and "I too, sing America" he suggests the interrelatedness of the two identities. The line "I am a Negro" is echoed as "I am the darker brother" in "I, too, Sing America". Between the American and the Negro, a third identity is suggested that of the poet or "Singer". It is this latter person^s which Hughes had assumed for himself in his attempt to resolve the dilemma of divided consciousness.⁽⁶⁾ In these poems the poet presents his poetry as a sort of salvation. 'The Weary Blues' the first poem, deals with a black Piano man who plays deep into the night until at last he falls into sleep:

6. Raymond Smith: Langston Hughes, p. 359.

He played a few chords then he sang some more -

"I got the Weary Blues

And I can't be satisfied

Got the Weary Blues

And can't be satisfied -

I ain't happy no mo '

And I wish that I had died"

And far into the night he crooned that tune

The stars went out and so did the moon,

The singer stopped playing and went to bed

While the Weary Blues echoed through his head

He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

The Last poem, on the other hand, treats of a rebirth,
an awakening, after the long night of Weary blues :

We have tomorrow

Bright before us

Like a flame

"In some of his poems of that period, especially in the opening section of The Weary Blues, Hughes successfully evokes the cabaret atmosphere : its sensuous gaiety heady music explosive vitality. The dominant attitude is the conventional "carpe diem" Have fun now, tomorrow ... who knows ? To its habitues, the cabaret is a refuge, an escape from routine and drudgery, a temple of worship."

The Depression of 1930s compelled Langston Hughes to reconsider the relation between his poetry and his people. He wrote : "I wanted to continue to be a poet. Yet sometimes I wondered if I was barking up the wrong tree. I determined to find out by taking poetry my poetry, to my people. After all, I wrote about Negroes, and primarily for Negroes. Would they have me ? Did they want me ?"⁽⁷⁾

Langston Hughes's poetic theme, in terms of social content and his art and technique underwent a marked change, when he began to write poetry in the thirties and afterward. His early work is based on the racialism in terms of the attitude of the white people toward the black ones. We cannot see Langston Hughes's development as a poet apart from the circumstances in which he was born, brought up and educated, and it led him to play the role of a poet. He thought poetry to be the best way to give voice to the feelings of the black masses. In the 1930s he embarked upon the lecture tour of Southern Colleges not with a view to rejecting his earlier work but with a view to redirecting and reshaping his purpose so that his voice might reach the black masses. He looked upon his poetry, which was written during the height of the Harlem Renaissance, as a valid statement on Negro life in America. His Fine Clothes to the Jew is entirely social and modeled on black folk forms.

What gained ground in his poetry in the thirties was the problem of identity. In this respect Hughes agreed with W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois wrote : "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, the sense of always looking at one-self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness ; - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings ; two warring ideals in one body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."⁽⁸⁾ Langston Hughes expressed the identical opinion in his famous essay The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America- this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization and to be as little Negro and as much as possible."⁽⁹⁾

"The great Depression of the 1930s found Langston Hughes rather comfortably ensconced as the bard of Harlem. Like other writers of this period, he travelled to Russia and visited war-torn Spain, but the poems, plays and short stories that he wrote were all about the Black Experience in America and life in Harlem. He enjoyed a rather unusual success in 1936 when his play Mulatto ran for a year on Broadway, and some-how, by never slackening his 8. W.E.B. Du Bois : The Souls of Black Folks (1930).
9. Published in The Nation, June 23, 1926.

place, he made a living with his pen- a remarkable accomplishment for a Black writer during the Depression."⁽¹⁰⁾

Langston Hughes regarded the role of a poet as one of responsibility to maintain his objectivity and artistic distance. This Philosophy developed in his mature poetry toward the end of his poetic career. Yet, unlike Walt Whitman, he celebrated racial discrimination to which he fell victim in every step of his life.

Langston Hughes' special achievement as a poet in his early poetry in terms of form and technique is that he turns jazz into poetry. Jazz is the after hours music of oppressed people. The jazz poem, unlike classic blues, has no fixed form; it is a species of free verse which attempts to approximate some of the qualities of jazz. The jazz poem attempts to capture instrumental vigor. Such poetry moves with the bouncy rhythms, and exuberance that Characterise the music. The sentences are casual and short-winded, the phrases are concise. 'Jazzonia' is an example in point :

Oh, silver tree !

Oh, shining rivers of the soul

In a Harlem cabaret

Six long headed jazzers play.

10. Renaissance and Radicalism 1915-1945, p. 316.

A dancing girl whose eyes are bold
Lifts high a dress of silken gold.
Oh, singing tree !
Oh, shining rivers o' the soul !⁽¹¹⁾

"This poem opens with an ecstatic union of sensory and spiritual facilities, with vocalic suggestions both rapturous and solemn. The next stanza gives dual recognition to the exotic thrust of jazz; its then strange extravagance is drawn with its cubist sharpness but kept expressively realistic through Picasso - like image of the jazz men's six long heads massed and titled. Its sexuality is colorfully emphatic in the enticing dancing girl. Allusions to Eve and Cleopatra add depth to the theme of the allurements and several interchanges of adjectives before "tree" and "rivers" fuse the reader's perceptions in apt anticipation of the concluding lines :

(12)

In a whirling cabaret
Six long-headed jazzers play.

The vigor and rhythmical exactness are fully represented by the opening stanza of 'Negro Dancer' published in the crisis in 1926:

"Ma an' ma baby's
Got two mo' ways,
Two mo' ways to - do de Charleston !"

11. Published in the Crisis 1923.

12. James A. Emanuel : Langston Hughes, p. 143.

Da, da

Da, da, da

Two mo' ways to do de Charleston !"

The poem is marked by its precise rendition of the dance that captured the verse, speed, and abandon of the Jazz Age. The poem ^{opens} ends with the repetition of the opening three lines:

"Me and ma baby's

Got two mo' ways,

Two mo' ways to do de Charleston !"

"Lenox Avenue : Mid-night" is Hughes' best jazz piece : it is published in The Weary Blues. It explains jazz partially :

The rhythm of life

Is a jazz rhythm.

The second stanza points out that jazz, like rain and street sounds, can vaguely reflect human woes. The final stanza is characterised by tight rhythmical pattern and dramatic intimations and suggests movement by the speaker into a slow jazzstep :

Lenox Avenue,

Honey

Mid-night,

And the gods are laughing at us.

In the poetry of Langston Hughes, the affirmation of blackness gains ground. What differentiates Hughes' poetry from the white avant-garde poets of the twenties moved around this important affirmation. Musical idioms, jazz rhythms, Hughes' special brand of "black-white" irony, and dialect were all dependent on the priority of black selfhood :

I am a Negro :

Black as the night is black

Black like the depths of my Africa.

The modernists threw light primarily on orality as common speech; "the contemporary avant - gardists concerned themselves with a fuller range, incorporating into their poems reverberations of jazz, the nasal tones of the street singer, and the hypnotic rhythms of chant, as well as the human voice. They wanted both to democratize the poem and to expand its aural possibilities."⁽¹³⁾

This stress placed on orality has made the white avant-garde an important influence on twentieth century black literature. Langston Hughes' poetry in the early period of his poetic development is not stilted and conventional as most black poetry had been so before the 1920s. The white avant-garde, with its new forms and ideas acted as a catalyst to liberate

13. William J. Harris : The poetry and poetics of Amiri Baraka,
p. 53.

black literature from antiquated ideas and forms. Langston Hughes was deeply influenced by white writers to fully explore black oral tradition. "In the 1920s, with the poetry of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, the problem of black orality is clearly posed. On the one hand, Cullen's antique form contradicted this twentieth-century black experience. The language of such lines as the following does not jibe with the sounds of 1920s Harlem :

My love is dark as yours is fair,
Yet lovelier I hold her
Than listless maids with pallid hair
And blood that's thin and colder. (14)

Cullen and Claude Mc Key wrote poetry denying black orality, but Langston Hughes wrote free verse and was well-acquainted with modernism; he could accommodate the blues and the black oral tradition into his poetry. In his poems we trace the smooth coupling of Afro-American expressive culture and poetic form. For example, in "Song for a Bango Dance" we can hear the impact of everyday black speech and blues form on Hughes' poetry :

Shake your brown fee, honey,
Shake your brown feet, chile
Shake your brown feet, honey,
Shake 'em swif and wil
Get way back, honey
Do that low- down step.

Walk on over, darling,
Now I come out
With your left. (15)

Langston Hughes infuses the sound of jazz into his poems, especially the poems of Montage of a Dream Deferred, published in 1959 :

What's written down
For white folks
ain't for us a - tail ;
"Liberty and Justice-
for All "
Oop- pop- a - da !
Shee Daddle- de- do !
Be - bop !
Salt' peanuts !
De- dop ! (16)

In "Trumpet player" in Fields of Wonder the meaning of jazz to the musician is amalgamated with racial background. Jazz is :

The music
From the trumpet at his lips
Is honey
Mixed with liquid fire.

15. Published in 1922 (The Weary Blues).

16. Hughes' selected poems, p. 224.

The rhythm
From the trumpet at his lips
Is ecstasy
Distilled from old desire.

Langston Hughes writes that the trumpet player never knows :

Upon what riff the music slips
Its hypodermic needle
To his soul.

At the end to the musician, trouble "Mellows to a golden note."
The poem reveals (the lines quoted above) the true distribution,
Jazz made precious by its long and sacrificial birth.

Jazz poetry is rhythmic and musical ; its sentences-
casual and short- worded, phrases short and tumbling after one
another in quick succession are reflected in "Railroad Avenue" :

Dusk dark
On Railroad Avenue.
Lights in the fish joints,
Lights in the pool rooms.
A box-car some train
Has forgotten
In the middle of the
flock.

A player piano,

A victrola.

942

Was the number.

A boy

Lounging on a corner.

A passing girl

With purple powdered skin.

Laughter

Suddenly

Like a taut drum

Laughter

Suddenly

Neither truth nor lie

Laughter

Hardening the dusk dark evening

Laughter

Shaking the lights in the fish joints

Rolling white balls in the pool rooms,

And evening untouched the box-Car

Some train has forgotten.

The rhythms of jazz and the idiomatic language of the blues are found in The Weary Blues which describes a jazz piano player and his song :

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
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Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sank some more-
"I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied-
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died."

Racial discrimination violence and brutality constitute the principal theme of his poetry. "The South" one of his earliest poems displays deep response to racial violence and brutality :

The lazy, laughing South
With blood on its mouth.
The sunny-faced South,
Beast-strong
Idiot-brained.

The child-minded South
Scratching in the dead fires' ashes
(18)
For a Negro's bones.

Langston Hughes holds up the picture of the South as "Seductive as a dark whore," "Cruel," "Money-lipped, syphilitic". The following two lines reveal the extensive meaning :

And I, who am black would love her
But she spits in my face.

The racial hatred is also marked here. The South, seen by a Negro trapped in its dangers and desires is painted with tense, brusque strokes in Hughes' earliest period.

"Song for a Dark Girl" deals with violence and brutality which are reflected in the first two stanzas :

Way Down South in Dixie
(Break the heart of me)
They hung my black young lover
To a cross roads tree.

Way Down South in Dixie
(Bruised body high in air)
I asked the white Lord Jesus
(19)
What was the use of Prayer.

18. Published in the Crisis (1922).

19. Published in the Crisis (1927).

In the 1930s Langston Hughes, along with a number of other intellectuals, was deeply impressed the communist teachings and began to coalesce racial ~~themes~~ themes with ideological ones. Blacks were oppressed not only as a race but as members of the working masses, and Langston Hughes voiced both for them and for the proletariat generally, including the white proletariat which was envisioned as brother to the black. In 1935, Hughes was addressing himself as a poet to "Comrade Lenin of Russia."

Langston Hughes was the first to air the spirit of the blues. In his note to his second volume Fine Clothes to the Jew (1927) he writes, "The Blues, unlike the Spirituals, have a strict poetic pattern: One long line is repeated and a third line to rhyme with the first two. In the poem "Homesick Blues" it is clearly marked: :

De rail road bridge's
A sad song in de air.
De railroad bridges'
A sad song in de air.
Ever' time de trains pass
I wants to go somewhere.

I went down to de station
Ms heart was in ma mouth.
Went down to de station ;

Heart was in me mouth;
Lookin' for a box car
To roll me to de South.

Homesick blues, Lawd
'S a terrible thing to have
Homesick blues is
A terrible thing to have
To keep from cryin'
I opens me mouth an' laughs.

Sometimes the second line in repetition is slightly changed and sometimes but very seldom, it is omitted. The mood of the Blues is almost always depressed and despondent but when they are sung, people laugh.

Langston Hughes' literary career took a new and significant direction, during the war years of the 1940s, he created the character of Jesse B. Simple. Simple as he came to be called, had just the right blend of qualities to be Black America's new spokesman- just enough urban humor, cynicism, and sardonic levity and just enough down home simplicity, mother-wit, innocence, and naivete.

As early as 1940s Langston Hughes focussed his attention on World War-II. His activities in these years stamped him as a poet of War and Peace. He did much to help

fight the War. He wrote jingles, verses and slogans for the Treasury Department's Defense Savings Staff in June of 1940 and among them, his eight-line "Defense Bond Blues" is remarkable. "In February, 1943 the writers' War Board wrote him that it was depending upon him for a flow of useful items. Often he sent doggerel; was effective, like."⁽²⁰⁾

Don't be a food sissy-
You can live without meat,
Don't be so 'hoosy
We've got Hitler to beat. (21)

Langston Hughes composed musical lyrics for the soldiers also. His "Freedom Road" is worthy to be mentioned. It was a song meant for official troupes for several Negro army units that gained transcontinental publicity.

Langston Hughes rounded out his creations filled with patriotic theme for 1942-1944 with radio material like "brothers" dealing with heroic Negro seamen :

Kinsmen- you and I,
You from Africa
I from the U. S. A.

In this stage of his poetic career Langston Hughes, he developed
20. James Emanuel : Langston Hughes.

21. Verse filled with Hughes' April 20, 1943, Letter to writer War Board. Other data came from 1942-43 correspondence with Board.

the War time literary service. "Lament for Dark Peoples" (June 1942) simply paints the picture of red and black men as taken from their primitive homes and "Caged in the circus of civilization."

Langston Hughes works in 1940s are more voluminous than those in any other decade. His Shakespeare in Harlem (1942), Fields of Wonder (1947), and One-Way Ticket (1949), and other poems were his principal poetic works. Shakespeare in Harlem is described as melancholy, biting and grim despite its hilarity and Hughes' prefatory description of it as 'light verse'. Several critics and scholars have stamped it as a conscious artistry in control of a refined social sensitivity. The content of this book led C. G. Woodson, a Negro historian to call him a "soldier for human rights."

"Death in Harlem" is a narrative poem of Shakespeare in Harlem. It delivers a glancing blow on the white addition to the Negro quarter of Manhattan. It develops the carousing of the Texas Kid and Arabella Johnson in Dixie's place, a swinging bit of low life that ends when Arabella guns down a ~~flirtatious~~ flirtatious girl who ^smisused her absence in the powder room. The faddist attitude toward Negro is scored in the following lines about the Fifth Avenue Whites who enter :

Dixie grinned. Dixie bowed,
Dixie rubbed his hands and laughed out loud-
While a tall white woman
In an ermine cape
Looked at the blacks and
Thought of rape,
Looked at the blacks and
Thought of a rope,
Looked at the blacks and
Thought of flame,
And thought of something
Without a name

"The poet introduces Uncle Tom, but with his charming grin there is the non-racial rubbing of money-making hands. The subsequent use of the color black in an almost diagrammatic pattern with rape, rope and flame has utter clarity. Yet the reader of poetry perhaps unreasonably at times, looks for elevation - even when the facts appear to deserve none. The point is Hughes' realistic introduction of down town Whites, like those in many an actual Harlem - bound taxi or limousine. The shooting, a crime of jealousy that closes serio-comic episodes, and itself a subject of the cult that broadcasts Negroes' as hazards to themselves over dice, dice, and frivolous women is turned against whites by the paired lines quoted. The reader compares the

social meaning of a cheap and fatal, but individual, brawl with that of a pathological, community - inspired lynching."⁽²²⁾

It("Death in Harlem") is a record of one of the meanings of Harlem nightlife. "Dixie's pleasure cellar is a den of death. Dixie is an eager Tom who wants money bottleleg money, sex money, blood money, any money. He rubs his hands, grins and bows as his white customers enter. In this nightspot the contraries meet and merge : black and white, poor and rich, pleasure and pain, laughter and death. The white presence presages death; the white women look at the blacks and think of rape, a rope, a flame. The dream of sex and violence, anticipating the sexual rivalry that will force the evening to a shuddering climax. Down south in Dixie it would have been death from a white mob ; but up north at Dixie it is death from the self-destructiveness of blacks, as it were activated by the white presence, actualizing the hidden white wish."⁽²³⁾

Death is unavoidable ; death and danger in life are expected. They are accepted parts of the evening's entertainment. The line, "Everybody's happy" which describes the music and dancing, is inseparably connected with "Stand back folks, let us / Have our fun" - where the fun lies with guns and knives.

The story is elaborately, but briskly narrated,

22. James A. Emanuel ; Langston Hughes.

23. Onascheke Jenie ; Langston Hughes - An Introduction to the poetry.

detailed but terse in classic folk manner. In conceptions and delivery, "Death in Harlem" is a literary child of the great epic cycles such as "The Signifying Monkey" "Shine and the Sinking of the Titanic" and "Stagolee." The mastery which Hughes developed in this poem is to be fully utilized in Montage of a Dream Deferred and Ask Your Mama.

In the 1940s Langston Hughes wrote many amusing poems which show a vascular part in the tissue of Negro experience. Humor, used in them in quite different from that occasionally found in the blues poems; for example in "Wide Revers" of The Dream Keeper - in that it belongs less to a tradition than to the literary being of the author. In "Bed Time" in Shakespeare in Harlem the amusing blink of the speaker is more of a departure for Hughes than it seems. While enjoying a secluded life after the exit of his woman, he reflects :

Listen at them mice
Do I see a couple ?
Or did I count twice ?

In a two-line poem in the same volume "Little Lyric (of Great Importance)", the speaker's upturned eyes and caustic :

I wish the rent
Was heaven sent."

are part of a continual grimace in Harlem ; and Hughes had not

forgotten the triple rent charged Negroes in the Cleveland of his youth.

Langston Hughes deals with wild nature in Fields of Wonder, an almost non-racial volume, meant for public entertainment. All the poems in this volume are instinct with lyricism. It is unique among his works in that it is almost all sweetness, with hardly a discordant note. Even the poems on 'Harlem' are tender and wistful. Images flame and burst like stars upon the page. The images of wall and fist return in "Dusk" to roughen the air of repose in much of Fields of Wonder (1947) :

Wandering in the dusk
Sometimes
You get lost in the dusk
And sometimes not,
Beating your fists
Against the wall,
You break your bones
Against the wall-
But sometimes not.

Walls have been known
To fall
Dusk turn to dawn
And chains be gone.

Fields of Wonder is called a literary heaven. In the poem 'Heaven', is described as a place of happiness ; here animals, birds and stones sing and salute each other. The poems in this volume is as perfect as heaven :

Heaven is
The place where
Happiness is
Everywhere.
Animals
And birds sing
As does Everything.

To each stone
"How-do-you-do ?"
Stone answers back
"Well ! And you ?"

Here Langston Hughes is at peace with himself and the world he lives in. He is described by Jean Toomer as "Earth Being". The songs in the volumes celebrate nature and all living beings, the stars, the sun and the moon, and the changing seasons ; the spring sprouting of plants and flowers ; the rain and the rainbow ; bird, snake, and snail ; the global dew ; the cycles of birth, life, death and rebirth, the ineffable powers of night, sleep, love and desire. That Langston Hughes was profoundly

influenced by Emily Dickinson, a great American lyrical poet is clearly marked in the poems "Heaven", "Shell", "Border Line", "Luck", "Walls", "Personal", "Gifts" etc.

To some people
Love is given
To Others-
Only heaven." (24)

Langston Hughes was also influenced by Imagism and haiku, and this influence is reflected in the poems like "One", "Montser-
tre", "Fragments", "Mother Land", "Big Sur" etc. The image in
"Big Sur" is marked :

Great lonely hills
Great mountains
Mighty touchstones of song.

Ezra Pound's influence is conspicuous in his characterization
of "Gypsy Melodies" :

Songs that break
And scatter
Out of the moon :
Rockets of Joy
Dimmed too soon.

24. 'Gifts' of Fields of Wonder (1947).

"A House in Taos" is a poem of Fields of Wonder, it rouses our curiosity marked by mysticism. In it we find a weary winery "you, she and I . . . smitten by beauty" long for wilderness and wait for nothingness. They call upon the cosmic forces to touch their bodies and water and mellow their barren hearts and whips their divided racial souls into human unity and divine oneness :

Wind

Touch our bodies, wind.

Our bodies are separate, in-dividual things.

Touch our bodies, wind,

But quickly blow quickly

Through the red, white, yellow skins

Of our bodies

To the terrible snarl,

Not mine,

Not yours,

Not hers.

But all one snarl of souls.

Blow quickly, wind,

Before we run back

Into the wilderness.

With our bodies-

Into the windlessness

Of our house in Taos.

In Fields of Wonder Langston Hughes has made a comparison between death and human activity, and to do this he has objectified and defined death into its niche in the cycle of existence. He looks on death with a cold, detached poetic eye. Change, in his opinion, is the other name of death :

Dear lovely Death
That taketh all things under wing-
Never to kill-
only to change
Into some other thing. . . .
Dear lovely Death,
Change is thy other name.

Death according to Langston Hughes, is magnetic, powerful and inescapable as the music. Death is like an absent mother for whom the child longs and waits :

I'm waiting for ma mammy,-
She is Death.

In Exits Langston Hughes says that Death is

. . . a nothing
From where
No soul- returns.

He calls grave "a sleeping place" a "resting place" and there is eternity beyond death, where :

I
Who are nobody,
Will become Infinity
Even - perhaps
(25)
Divinity.

Langston Hughes' conception of death is identical with that of Emily Dickinson. To Dickinson death is always associated with eternity. It is her firm belief that death is not dreadful ; it is only an escape from the routine life a relief from the trials and tribulations of this world. She also believes that death does not kill ; it changes ; it causes a new life. Death, to her, paves the way for after-life. Beyond death, we find the celestial city of Eternity. She also, like Hughes, objectifies death.

Langston Hughes became extremely shocked to mark prejudiced administration of the white- run government to which the black Americans fall victims. He aired his grave concern over distressing feature of slum life. "Balled of the Landlord" first collected in Jin Crow's Last Stand condemns the callous landlord, prejudiced police, Judge and press :

Police ! Police !
Come and get this man !
He's trying to ruin the government
And overturn the land !

25. "Three" of Fields of Wonder (1947).

Copper's whistle !

Patrol bell !

Arrest.

Precint Station.

Iron cell.

Headlines in press :

Man threatens Landlord

Tenant held no bail

Judge gives Negro 90 days in country jail.

The first half of the poem is regular and well rhymed (abcb) and the second one is irregular. The conventional rhymes lie in the words 'land' and 'man', "arrest" and "Press". "Parade" deals with a faintly humorous type of police discrimination.

Langston Hughes is concerned for the effect of prejudiced and discriminatory attitude toward children. His "Merry-Go-Round" first printed in 1942 pictures the confusion of a migrant Southern Negro child who cannot decide, at a carnival which horse to mount. Here a child asks in frustration and disappointment where is the back of the merry-go-round as black people always have to sit at the back. As he is accustomed to back-seat, Jim Crow rules on trains and busses, he says :

But there ain't no back
To a merry-go-round
Where's the horse
For a kid that's black ?

The turnabout here is social and psychological as well as mechanical. One sees the surprise of structure falling apart, the pathos of innocence assembling tainted pieces. This poem, resting its case simply and almost entirely on its perfect idea, seems one of those rare works that flow quickly and evenly from the mind."⁽²⁶⁾

"One Friday Morning" published in 1941 in the Crisis deals with the prejudice against the Negro young (Nancy).²⁶ "Madam and the Rent Man" (poetry, September, 1943), treats of how the Negroes are encumbered by prejudiced administration of government and the problem of housing :

The sink is broke,
The water don't run,
And you ain't done a thing
You promised to've done.

Back window's cracked
Kitchen floor squeaks,
There's rats in the cellar.
And the allie leaks.

26. James A. Emanuel : Langston Hughes, p. 72.

"Restrictive covenants" (One-Way Ticket, 1949) opens with a few verses on the life of an American Negro :

When I move
Into a neighbourhood
Folks fly.

"Deceased" in One-Way Ticket was an anecdote about death :

"The lickar
Was lye."

"In could Be" in One-Way Ticket the lines :

"When you pawned my watch
You pawned my heart" and
"Any place is dreary
Without my watch and you"

"Show how humorous expression in personal relations can gauge the twisting of responses under economic or other duress."⁽²⁷⁾ It is interesting enough that life, love and joy constitute another theme of One-Way-Ticket. In "Mama and Daughter" a mother, while brushing the coat of her daughter who is going out to call on her "Sugar-sweet", lets the girl know that she once followed the same normal impulse.

In this stage of his poetic development racial theme

27. James A. Emanuel, : Langston Hughes (153-154).

predominates over his non-racial one. "Theme for English B" (Common Ground, Spring, 1949) deals with public discrimination and inequality of opportunity in education. It is one of the most nearly autobiographical poems. It recounts his own experience at Columbia University in the year 1921-22. American identity of necessity embraces equally the white and the black experience. Those two experiences are inseparably linked and defined one by the other, even though neither group explains the idea :

Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
But we are, that's true :

"The One-Way-Ticket that contains "Negro Servant" however, includes poems suggesting the freedom- now attitude that began to transform the 1960s." (28) 'Puzzled' deserves mention. Its content is more important than its poetic quality. It deals with Harlem :

Remembering the old lies
The Old kicks in the back,
The Old, Be patient.

The almost identical mood is traced in the poem "Democracy" (9143) which deals with the fact that personal dynamism and

28. James A. Emanuel : Langston Hughes.

political liberty are very essential for man's only heaven, an earthly one. The following two lines make the theme :

I do not need my freedom when I'm dead,
I cannot live on tomorrows bread.

"Freedom Plow" (1943), Hughes' long narrative poem, is characterised by something of a patriotic, wartime flair. Here we also trace the basic feelings of the poet to build America :

America
Land created in common,
Dream nourished in common
Keep your hand on the plow ! Hold on !
If the house is not yet finished,
Don't be discouraged, builder
If the fight is not yet won,
Don't be weary, soldier
The plan and pattern is here,
Woven from the beginning
Into the Warp and woof of America . . .

The 1930s is an important period of his poetic career in this decade Hughes' maturity as a poet is quite clear; and this decade excelled other ones in his career as he produced a number of poems, fictions, articles etc. His poetic art, technique and style attain maturity also. The works produced

in this decade reveal his widened interest in Negro history. But his poetic output is relatively small during the 1950s.

Montage of a Dream Deferred (1951), included in Selected Poems recounts the dream as deferred not dead or incapable of fulfilment. There is a certain grimness in the poem for example in its most famous section "Harlem" which opens with :

What happens to a dream deferred ?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin' in the sun ?

But the grimness continues unstopped. This grimness is the direct product of Hughes' experience about the ravages of racial discrimination which the poet stamps as manifestations of Evil.

"On the day when the Savoy
leaps clean over to Seventh Avenue
and starts jitterbugging
With the Renaissance,
On that day when Abyssinia Baptist Church
throws her enormous arms around
St James Presbyterian . . .
(30)

• • •
May be it ain't right-

but the people of the night

Will give even

a snake
(31)
a break

The whole tone of Montage of a Dream Deferred is characterized by the well-known "Ballad of the Land lord". There the bitter-sweet quality of Hughes' attitude toward his subjects is clear. The poet said in its introductory paragraphs that it combined into a single "poem on contemporary Harlem" about sixty pages of poetry reprinted from nine periodicals. The poet catches the talk, song, and action of Harlem by forsaking blues patterns and smooth jazz rhythm for the shifting broken cadences of boogie-woogie and be-bop. In this decade Langston Hughes is one of many poets who gave public readings of their poetry to the accompaniment of a jazz band, hoping thereby to develop a new popular art. Among the poems inspired by be-bop- a rhythmically complex and experimental kind of jazz marked by dissonance, improvisation and unusual lyrics- the best is the lead-off "Dream Boogie" in Montage of a Dream Deferred :

Good morning, daddy
Ain't you heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred ?

Listen closely :

You 'll hear their feet

Boating out and beating out a-

You think

It's a happy beat ?

Listen to it closely :

Ain't you heard

Something underneath

Like a-

What did I say ?

Sure,

I'm happy

Take it away !

Hey, Pop !

Re-bop

Mop !

Y-e-ah !

It "is more carefully orchestrated than Hughes' earlier volumes because conceived as a unity, as one continuous poem, although it is organised in sections and subtitles just like the others, and uses single poems previously published in periodicals. In Montage the days of our black lives are telescoped into one day and one night. Montage is primarily a technique of the motion picture, its camera eye sweeping swiftly from scene to scene,

Just as posing disparate scenes in rapid succession or superimposing one scene (layer of film) over another until the last fades into the next. In literature, Montage provides a technical shortcut, a means of avoiding the sometimes long-winded 'logical' transitions demanded by the conventional story line. Through montage, the reader/reviewer is able to traverse vast spaces and times (and consciousness), in a relatively brief moment." (32) Maintaining a changing Harlem, Langston Hughes is alert to the "hip" insider's elastic jargon as well as the generations - old truth of Negro life- the dream deferred. "Dream Boogie" perfectly fulfills its purpose, wasting no word. It has variation in mood : ease, irony, sarcasm, and terse joviality. It blends old devices of the dramatic monologue with a boogiewoogie beat. Its rough-hewn grace adds powers to its clarity.

Langston Hughes was more concerned about his racial theme than his individual, self. He did his best to suppress the personal element in his poetry. In his essay published in the journal Phylon in 1947 on his "adventures" as a social poet, Hughes opined that his "earliest poems were social poems in that they were about people's problems- whole group of people's problems- rather than my own personal difficulties."

Poverty, injustice and economic oppression to which the black Americans fall victims attracted to and impelled

32. Onwuchekwa Jemie : Langston Hughes - An Introduction to the poetry, p. 63.

Hughes to write poetry highlighting the problems of which he sought permanent end. In the fifties, Langston Hughes, like other black poet, was profoundly interested in the social and economic freedom and equality to be ensured to the black Americans. He draws on the facts of black urban life to nourish a feelings of community in blackness, and it is this perspective and objective that distinguish him from other black poets.

Langston Hughes remained the literary exponent of the social cultural, spiritual, and emotional experiences of Black America. Throughout his literary career he tried his best to explore the nooks and crannies of the Black Experience, especially in its urban dimensions. Life in urban as typified by Harlem, became for this well-attuned and well-adjusted man of literature. Harlem became his spiritual, esthetic and emotional source of poetry.

Langston Hughes achieved the global fame as a poet of the people, as innovator and as literary spokesman of Negro Americans as soon as he reached the sixties of his life. This is the final decade of this poetic career. Thousands of people had heard him read his poems. His verses had been harmonized in great auditoriums. But his time-consuming correspondence and theatrical involvements have decreased his poetic efforts, yet he has produced new works during the sixties. Individual occa-

sions have inspired some. "And so the Seed" was composed for a testimonial dinner honoring the Jelliffes of Karamu House in 1963. The Harlem riot of the next Year evoked his caustic "Harlem Call" (American Dialog, October-November, 1964). The tender "Silent One" (The New York Times, November 9, 1962) represents the continuation of his non-racial lyrical strain. "Do knobs" (The Outsider, No. I 1961) beginning with :

"The simple silly terror
Of a doorknob on- a door."

shows the restless yawning of contemporary rhythms and meaning so evident in his Ask Your Mama (1961). In The Panther and the Lash there are some poems which reflect the racially turbulent years climaxed by the Black Panther Party.

What is thematically prominent in his poetry of the sixties is the changing face of the Negro America. 'He advocates Black power.' "Black Panther" (33) which is a central thematic poem. The panther stands for the new Negro militancy and dramatizes the shift in politics from non-violence to Black power, from a defensive to an offensive stance. He lays emphasis on the essential under lying will to survival-against brutal ~~unpleasant~~ odds- of either position. He is less concerned with approving or disapproving of Black power than with demonstrating the necessity and inevitability of the shift, in todays

33. From The Panther and the Lash by Langston Hughes, 1967.

racial crisis :

Pushed into the corner
Of the hobnailed boot,
Pushed into the corner of the
"I-don't want to die" cry
Pushed into the corner of
I don't want to study war no more,"
Changed into "Eye for eye,"
The Panther in his desperate boldness
Wears no disguise,
Motivated by the truest
Of the oldest
Lies.

Poems written in this decade are almost entirely new in matter of art and technique. These are characterised by his sensibility. Keeping abreast with time and the intensity of his new concerns which have helped him to avoid old, crippling mannerisms, the trade marks of his art and come to fruition in many of the best poems of his career. "Dinner Guest : Me" is an example in point :

I know I am
The Negro Problem
Being wined and dined
Answering the usual questions
That come to white mind

Which seek demurely
To prope in polite way
The why and wherewithal
Of darkness 'L.S.A. -
Wandering how things got this way

In current democratic night,
Murmuring faintly
Over fraises des bois,
"I'm so ashamed of being white."⁽³⁴⁾

The Panther and the Lash is the least cheerful, the least optimistic of Hughes' volumes of poetry. But side by side with pessimism, optimism is amply traced in this volume. The poet is optimistic of the good days to come for the American black people, and thus the evil days will end :

Quick, sunrise come !
Sunrise out of Africa,
Quick, come !
Sunrise, please come
Come ! Come ! Come !⁽³⁵⁾

* * *

Four little girls
Might be awakened someday soon

34. The Panther and the Lash by Langston Hughes 1967.

35. The Panther and the Lash by Langston Hughes 1967, p. 47.

By songs upon the breeze
As yet unfelt among magnolia trees. (36)

* * *

In some lands
Dark night
And cold steel
Prevail -
But the dream
Will come back,
And the song
Break
Its jail. (37)

* * *

The past has been a mint
Of blood and sorrow.
That must not be
True of tomorrow. (38)

Though the poet cherishes optimism, he remains a pessimist in respect of his faith in democracy. America and several programs and systems that are not at all concerned with the black uplift.

Pessimism is the characteristic mark of "Harlem"

36. Panther and the Lash by Langston Hughes 1967, p. 47.

37. Panther and the Lash by Langston Hughes 1967, p. 63.

38. Panther and the Lash by Langston Hughes 1967, p. 69.

in which Langston Hughes has compared the Afro-American life to a raisin. The black man is treated as a thing of no consequence:

What happens to a dream deferred ?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun- ?
Or fester like a sore-
And then run ?
Does it stink like rotten meat ?
Or crust and sugar over
Like a syrupy sweet ?
May be it just sags
like a heavy load. (39)
Or does it explode ?

The images (raisin, fester etc.) used in this poem establish his maturity as a poet of superb poetic artistry. The images are sensory, domestic, earthly, like blues images.

Violence, blood-shed and brutality which constitute the themes of his most poems are reflected in "Birmingham Sunday" :

But left instead
Their blood upon the wall

39. Langston Hughes's The Panther and the Lash - 1963, p. 73.

With spattered flesh
And bloodied Sunday dresses
Scorched by dynamite that
China made weons ago
Did not know what China made
Before China was ever Red at all
Would redden with their blood
This Birmingham - on - Sunday wall. (40)

We often speak of Langston Hughes' Optimism in his poetry but his optimism is invariably tinged with pessimism. The poet hopes for a change, hopes for a light that would dispel the murky darkness of brutality, violence, racial discrimination that have stigmatized not only the United States of America, but the entire white ruled world where the Negroes live without any human right. They are always chained and even they are not born free. Langston Hughes admitted this in his poem "Let America Be America Again"

There's never been equality for me
Nor freedom in this "home land of the free".

Hughes' dream for a happy America is doubtful. Democracy for the black masses is amply called in question; the commercialization of Christianity in America will, I am afraid, not ever go. Racialism will continue to hold its sway over racial
40. Panther and the Lash by Langston Hughes 1967.

equality in all sphere of the American life. These are the inherent diseases that characterise the white mentality. There is no medicine, manufactured so far in the laboratory of the white sensibility. There is no thing, I can predict, that can ensure the black life; it is the rise of consciousness. Their organised and united demand is the best remedy for the present in human situation they live in.

Ask your Mama (1961) is Langston Hughes' most sustained long poetic work. It is another montage of dream deferred. In this volume of poetry, the leading motifs- Santa Claus and Christmas, white snow and dark shadows, mother, grand mother, and grand father, river and railroad, quarter, recur quite often as single words or phrases embedded in alien contexts. "These together with the book's design- its album shape, pastel colored pages, abstract cubist illustration, two tone lettering, and the capital letter in which the whole poem is printed - underline the fact that Ask your Mama is an avant - garde experiment. Remarkably, the linguistic idiom is not primarily black, though of course, the title, rhythm, music and ethos are."⁽⁴¹⁾

"The principal effects of Ask Your Mama requires no musical background. Although the lines like "Boundaries bind unbinding" add only percussion, and others like "Ina"- Youre at the masthead" mean almost nothing to readers ~~unacquainted~~

41. Omwachekwa Jemie : Langston Hughes - An Introduction to the Poetry.

unacquainted with the names of the Qualls family, Hughes' "range of subtle nuances is new," as mentioned, though not detailed by Redding. His references to Negro history and racial oppression are often pointed. It is his still unanalysed style that is subtle."⁽⁴²⁾

This volume of poetry is explicitly written for a musical accompaniment. The traditional folk melody of "The Hesitation Blues" is the listmotif and in and around it, along with the other recognizable melodies employed, there is room for spontaneous jazz improvisation. It has marginal notes for musical accompaniment and appends "Lines Notes for the poetically unhelp." Visually striking, its color format reflects the author's admiration for Duke Ellington whose Black, Brown and Beige match the poet's twelve moods and explains the alternating blue and brown ink on beige paper- called terracotta, salmon- and pumpkin-colored by various reviewers.

In the volume, Hughes' style may be described as dribbling : The followings lines are an instance in point :

In the quarter of the Negroes
Where Negroes sing so well
Negroes sing so well
Sing so well
So well
Well ?

42. ~~Jane As Emanuel~~ : Langston Hughes.

Literary counterpoint is off and on used by him.

At the end of "Gospel Cha-Cha" Hughes sets side by side with the lines of religious and secular names with lines narrating the climb to Calvary" Finding among the three on that hill that :

"One, yes, one
Was black as me"

the speaker immediately ends the section with "Cha-Cha . . .
Cha- Cha Cha." This indifferent turnabout, ~~marks~~ contrasting in mood and meaning with an esthetic experiment which it terminates, compares to other poems like "Dream Boogie" which is a rhythmically complex and experimental kind of jazz marked by dissonance, improvisation and unusual lyrics. The poetry of Ask Your Mama does indeed "listen" to jazz rhythms. The step-rhythm of the following lines for example, recreates the cumulative repetition of instrumental jazz :

In the
In the quarter
In the quarter of the Negroes
* * *
Singers
Singers like O-
Singers like Odette- and that statue (43)
* * *

De-

Delight-

(44)

Delighted ! Introduce me to Eartha.

This volume of poetry is instinct with humor, irony, and exciting imagery and contains echoes of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", "As I drew Older" and "The Cat and the Saxophone".

To conclude, Langston Hughes' development as a poet is a landmark in the history of the Afro-American poetry. The theme of affirmation of his faith in the American dream gains ground in his mature poetry. It is worth mentioning that what appears prominent in his poetic theme is to affirm racial unity of Black and White America and denounce racial discrimination, social and political inequality, violence and brutality which are more clearly, and vehemently expressed in his mature poetry. What is stressed in his mature poetry is his encouragement of the 'Negro Revolution' against the white tyranny, exploitation, oppression and deliberate racial discrimination. His mannerisms in terms of poetic technique art, style and language are superseded by those having great poetic and aesthetic value.