

## **Langston Hughes's Literary Revolution: Deliberate Choice of Jazz, Gospel and Black Poetry**

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### **Abstract**

*The present work intends to bring evidence to the point that Langston Hughes is a revolutionary. As a matter of fact, like his contemporaries of the Harlem Renaissance Movement and later on the writers and poets of Negritude, he wrote poems that can be termed unconventional. They are so called because they did not respect any prevailing aesthetic rules governing poetry in their epoch. These poems are of three categories. Jazz poetry, here Hughes patterned his poems after the rhythm of Jazz music. This rhythm was very popular among the Blacks in Harlem. Gospel is another new type of poetry created by Hughes. Here the poems are patterned after Gospel music which is also popular with black churches in the South especially during the slavery time. The last category of new poetry that Hughes brought to the world of theater was Black poetry, that is, poetry that was concerned with the black people's experience in the U.S.A. Poems from all these three categories are analyzed in the paper.*

**Key Words:** Aesthetic rule, Black Churches, Literary revolution and Poetry

## **Introduction**

Traditionally, poetry is used to be the most sophisticated literary genre. Verses were to follow special patterns (rhyme schemes), even the subject matter must be about noble sentiments. In a comment about the American poet, Walt Whitman, one could read:

The great American poet would create both new forms and new subject matter for poetry. Rhyme would not be primary, if used at all; uniformity of stanzaic pattern would be abandoned. Whitman was even clearer about the new content. The American poetry would not echo the melancholy complaints of the Graveyard school nor proliferate the moral precepts of didactic writers like Longfellow. Exaggeration of both style and subject would be replaced by "genuineness," by respect for the way things are.

(The Norton Anthology of American Literature: p.1963).

Like Whitman the poets and writers of The Harlem Renaissance Movement, and later on of Négritude, would invent their own poetry. Writing poetry for them has become a way to redeem Blacks all over the world from the animalistic world they were thrown into by the racist West. These poets and writers as a result of their preoccupation and distrust they felt toward Western aesthetic standards for writing, decided to write according to their own cultural aesthetic rules. In large part they vowed not to write according to the modes of classic Western literature. For instance, Blacks and black motifs became the ideal subject matter for their writings. In his discussion of the Harlem Renaissance Movement, Alain Locke rightly observed that:

Each generation, however, will have its creed, and that of the present is the belief in the efficacy of collective effort, in race co-operation. This deep feeling of race is at present the mainspring of Negro life. It seems to be the outcome of the reaction to proscription and prejudice; an attempt fairly successful on the whole, to convert a defensive into an offensive position, a handicap into an incentive. It is radical in tone, but not in purpose and only the most stupid forms of

opposition, misunderstanding or persecution could make it otherwise.

(Locke, *The New Negro*: p.11).

Hughes is one of the forerunners of this new and revolutionary mode of poetry writing. That is why this paper intends to focus on his poetry. This poetry as it is shown here includes Jazz, Gospel and Black Poetry, that are discussed in turn in this work. Such types of poems did not exist before in written literature. However Hughes deliberately chose to write after that fashion, most probably to show that Blacks have their own ways and values in the one hand; and in the other hand to refute the assertion that Blacks could not use their imagination to create anything artistic. He observed in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" that:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter... If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure does not matter either.

(Dickinson, *A Bio-bibliography of Langston Hughes 1902-1967* : p. 34).

As early as in the beginning of his career as a poet, Hughes made it clear that what he was going to write about were the black people who were miserable because of the racism of white America. White Americans were deliberately doing everything to frustrate its black population. A distinctive feature of Harlem, especially where the Blacks lived in the 1920s, was the density of its population. It could not be otherwise, accommodation there was expensive and for the poor Blacks to afford this, they had to get together in order to pay the high rents. It thus follows that all the problems inherent to overcrowded areas are found in the black belt of Harlem. In fact, the situation for Blacks in New York at that time can be likened to the situation of the Montsou mining workers that Zola described in *Germinal*, where alcohol drinking,

sexual immorality, and dire poverty were common features of the workers' daily lives. Hughes declared that:

Certainly there is for the American Negro artist who can escape the restrictions the more advanced in his own group would put upon him, a great field of unused material ready for his art. Without going outside of his race, and even among the better classes with their "white" culture and conscious American manners, but still Negro enough to be different, there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work.

(Dickinson, *A Bio-bibliography of Langston Hughes 1902-1967*: p.43).

Hughes is making the point in this excerpt that black artists had no other choice than to be militant. According to him, the black milieu in Harlem could increase their opportunities for success. On the one hand it would give them inspiration. This is an interesting point. A black person observing the life of Blacks in Harlem would be moved to do something to alleviate the sufferings of Blacks there. The invisible man in Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* could not resist trying to defend the old black woman being evicted in the winter. It is a fact that the young boy went to New York with the idea of becoming a black man with notoriety like the President of the Southern College that was firing him. Before he had the time to obtain any training, he saw himself thrown into action fighting for better conditions for Blacks in New York, even before he was recruited by the Brotherhood (see Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*). On the other hand the familiarity with the despair Blacks were experiencing especially in Harlem could provide a good source of subject matter for creative works. The French writer, Gustave Flaubert rightly wrote the following when he was working on his novel, *Madame Bovary*:

If the book I am writing with so much trouble comes out well, by its very existence I shall have established these two truths, which to me are axiomatic; first, that poetry is subjective, that in Literature there are no fine artistic subjects, that therefore Yvetot is worth just as much as

Constantinople; and that consequently one subject is as good as another. *It is up to the artist to raise everything*; he is like a pump, he has a big tube in him which goes down to the vitals of things to the deepest layers. (III, 249, To Louise Colet, June 26, 1853).

(Flaubert, "On Realism": p.93).

Hughes did act on his words. He did not hesitate to refer in his poetry to the bad side of black people's life, especially in Harlem. In his poem "Young Sailor" (Hughes, *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*: p.73) the poet referred to a young black sailor who confessed that any money that came his way was spent on drinking and on women. This is not typical subject matter for poems. Originally poetry was meant largely for the education of readers. Writing about a sailor, with no other intention than to waste his youth, could not be appropriate for the traditional poetry genre. The life of the young sailor could not be a good example to be followed by any reader. Although there was no mention of the race of the sailor, there are strong indications that he was a black person. The reference to the "brown land" in the poem can be an indication that the sailor is of African origin. Black people in the US are sometimes referred to as brown. The African American poet, Countee Cullen, wrote in his poem "A Brown Girl Dead":

With two white roses on her breasts,  
White candles at head and feet,  
Dark Madonna of the grave she rests;  
Lord Death has found her sweet.

(Cullen, *The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen*: p.82).

There is no doubt that Cullen's brown girl was a black person. She was a "Dark Madonna". The other indication that Hughes's sailor was a black person was that his life represented a prototype of the life led by Blacks in Harlem at the time of this writing. The young sailor, just like any ordinary black American living in Harlem, was marginalized. That is, he was not allowed to live in a milieu that would allow him to improve his circumstances. The great majority of the Harlem population was

composed of unskilled workers who did not have any formal education. This situation was made worse by the many frustrations they were forced to experience. They did the same work as white people, but were paid less. They lived packed together in run-down places, but they paid higher rents. Being aware of all these and knowing very well, that there was nothing they could do to better their lot, Blacks in Harlem could not resist the temptation to drown their troubles in all sorts of vices. By indulging in those kinds of vices, they satisfied their psychological needs of reacting to the injustices they were victims of on a daily basis. It appeared senseless to the ordinary reader that the sailor should save his money or use it to help other Blacks who might need it for better purposes. However things were not as simple as they might appear for the distant observer. Hughes in his poem, "Minnie Sings Her Blues" provides valuable insights for the understanding of such mindless behavior from the Harlem Blacks. He wrote the following in the poem:

Cabaret, cabaret!  
That's where ma man an' me go.  
Cabaret, cabaret!  
That's where we go,—  
Leaves de snow outside  
An' our troubles at de door.  
Jazz band, jazz band!  
Ma man an' me dance.  
When I cuddles up to him  
No other gal's got a chance.  
Baby, O, Baby,  
I'm midnight mad.  
(Hughes, C.W.I: p.100).

The cabaret here was described as a Heaven on Earth. Under normal circumstances, it should be perceived as a place of human decline. Ironically, for Minnie it proved to be the only place where she found peace of mind. As soon as she entered the cabaret, she forgot all her problems. Her frustrations disappeared. There was no white man

around to push her to the corner or to make her feel uncomfortable because of the color of her skin. The cabaret was also the place where she felt secure when she was in the arms of her “man”. There, no other woman tried to snatch him from her. The cabaret can thus be said to render a couple’s life stable. The cabaret also proved to be a comfortable place for Minnie and her “man” because they did not feel cold there in winter. This can be taken as a hint to the fact that the places where Blacks lived in Harlem were not adequately heated for them to feel comfortable.

The poem “Natcha”, is another poem that found an acceptable motive for a path of life that ought to be avoided. The poem reads:

Natcha, offering love.  
For ten shillings offering love.  
Offering: A night with me, honey.  
A long, sweet night with me.  
Come, drink palm wine.  
Come, drink kisses.  
A long, dream night with me.  
(Hughes, C.W.I: p.50).

In “Natcha”, Hughes broke another rule. He brought to the noble world of poetry a base preoccupation. Poetry traditionally was meant to express feelings of emotion. This poem can be said to be just an advertisement for cheap sex. However shocking this can appear, it might be a common feature of life in black communities in Harlem. In fact all the conditions were met there for a great variety of vices to flourish. The place was overcrowded and misery reigned. Women who ran short of money would naturally resort to “le plus vieux métier du monde” (the world’s oldest trade) to make ends meet. This is arguably the situation of the young prostitute in the poem. Since she did not have any other means to survive, she had to barter her own body for “ten shillings” a night. She needed to be competitive otherwise she could not get customers. In addition to selling her body, she also was inclined to drink alcoholic beverages. She was not of age to be exposed to such drinks, however she took them. Sadly the little girl needed to take such

drinks in order to make her trade bearable. Or she was using the idea of hot drink to attract consumers. Some men might find it unattractive to go to prostitutes. In that case also, drinking helped overcome that reluctance. In the poem, the young prostitute referred to palm wine which was evidence that she was a black prostitute. At the same time this could suggest that she was from a poor background and could only know something of lesser quality.

Hughes' breaking poetry rules would not stop at the evocation of the life of the prostitute. In "Natcha, his poem, "A Song to a Negro Wash-woman" he praises the trade of a washwoman. This trade was considered one of the most respected jobs available for black women in post-slavery America. After their liberation from slavery black women could, with some luck, easily get the position of washwoman in the homes of white families. This job allowed them to care for their children and husbands. A peculiarity with black families in post-slavery America was that black men were fond of staying at home doing nothing, according to some African American female writers. Tony Morrison's "The Bluest Eye" is a good example for this point. In the majority of black families, the wife supported the whole family financially. The alternative situation was that the men would simply run away to escape having to work and support their family. In a word, the black woman in many cases had the responsibility to feed the family. Working as a washwoman was one of the most common positions that allowed them to care for their families. White men might overlook this trade, because they did not understand how useful it proved to be for the raising of black families. Hughes is more than justified when he praised the trade in his poem. One could read the following in the poem:

And I've seen you singing, wash-woman. Out in the back-yard  
garden under the apple trees, singing, hanging white clothes on  
long lines in the sun-shine.

And I've seen you at the church a Sunday morning singing, praising  
your Jesus, because some day you're going to sit on the right  
hand of the Son of God and forget you ever were a wash-  
woman. And the aching back, and the bundles of clothes will be  
unremembered then.



Yes, I've seen you singing.  
And for you,  
O singing wash-woman,  
For you, singing little brown woman,  
Singing strong black woman,  
Singing tall yellow woman,  
Arms deep in white suds,  
Soul clean,  
Clothes clean,—  
(Hughes, C.W.I: p.159).

In this excerpt, Hughes eulogizes two characteristics of the washwoman. She is hard working. There was no indication in the poem that she complained about her job. She was just described as doing her duties whatever the weather. Even in the sunshine she was spotted busy with her job. The other characteristic that Hughes highlights was her devotion to her church. In her church she was seen singing. Definitely the washwoman deserved to be praised. She was a suffering woman. Her back pained her as a result of her trade. Washwomen in those days could not avoid the pain. They had to bend down for hours doing their washing. However, after her day's work was done, she found the strength to sing at church just as she would sing while doing her washing job. Maybe, as the poet put it, she was convinced of being rewarded when she died, because God would welcome her in paradise.

Blues constitutes another feature of black people's lives that Hughes brought to the world of poetry. Blues, according to Arnold Rampersad, are nothing less than the Negro folk songs. He wrote in a note to Hughes's *Fine Clothes to the Jew* that:

The first eight and the last nine poems in this book are written after the manner of the Negro folk-songs known as Blues. The Blues unlike the *Spirituals*, have a strict poetic pattern: one long line repeated and a third line to rhyme with the first two. 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 despondency, but when they are sung people laugh.  
(Rampersad, C.W.I: p.73).

Rampersad conceded in the above quotation that Hughes did something new. He brought the quality of Negro folk songs to the world of poetry. Bringing an aspect of black culture to the world of poetry could not have been conceived before the Harlem Renaissance Movement. In fact, Blacks were thought of as people without a civilization and as such could not have anything to offer the civilized world that the West stood for. Blues, as Rampersad described it, had its rules and forms. It was presented as a patterned composition. This fact could make of it a theorized manner of writing. The mood of the Blues was pre-established. Therefore it would not be a great wrong to liken Blues compositions to any poem with fixed form such as a sonnet. The following poem, "Misery", is a good illustration to Rampersad's notion of Blues.

Play the blues for me.  
Play the blues for me.  
No other music  
'Ll ease ma misery.  
Sing a soothin' song.  
Said a soothin' song,  
Cause de man I love's done  
Done me wrong.  
Can't you understand,  
O, understand  
A good woman's cryin'  
For a no-good man?  
Black gal like me,  
Black gal like me  
'S got to hear a blues  
For her misery.

(Hughes, C.W.I: p.76).

The poem is written following the poetic pattern of blues as described by Rampersad. Lines 5 and 6: "Sing a soothin' song./Said a soothin'

song,/ do rhyme with Lines 7 and 8: "Cause de man I love's done/ Done me wrong." Equally lines 9 and 10:

"Can't you understand,/O, understand" rhyme with lines 11 and 12: "A good woman's cryin'/For a no-good man?" The poem "Misery" also satisfied the condition stated by Rampersad that the mood of blues should be sad, but when it is sung it should provoke laughter. The story of the persona in the poem is indeed moving. She was a black girl. This fact of being black in itself carries a lot of meaning. A black girl could be an example of any black girl in post-slavery US who suffered a double discrimination. They suffered from white discrimination. The following quotation from bell hooks, in his paper, "Racism and Feminism", sheds more light on this idea of discrimination against black women.

In general, white women did not wish to associate with black women because they did not want to be contaminated by morally impure creatures. White women saw black women as a direct threat to their social standing – for how could they be idealized as virtuous, goddess-like creatures if they associated with black women who were seen by the white public as licentious and immoral.

(hooks, A.P.: p.317).

Black women suffered terribly from black male discrimination; in fact, black women were considered by black men as inferior beings. In one of her stories written in the 1920s, "John Redding Goes to See" Hurston provided a good illustration of how black women were treated as incapable of good judgment by black men. In the story, Mr. Alfred Redding disregarded his wife's warning that their son John "got a spell on 'im". "Aw, woman, stop that talk 'bout conjure. Tain't so no how. Ah doan want Jawn tuh git dat foolishness in him." ("John Redding Goes to See": p.1). Despite the fact that John's mother was convinced that she was right, she couldn't do anything to stop her boy's ill-fate. And unfortunately the boy died later carried away by a river turned dangerous during a storm.

The persona in Hughes's poem, "Misery", being a black girl, represented a specimen of a weakened being from her society. She

suffered discrimination from white people and she suffered discrimination from black men. She was such a weakened being that her unscrupulous lover decided to abandon her. Under normal circumstances he should have tried to make her happy and to stand by her when there was trouble. The ideal behavior from the lover would be to help her overcome the mistreatment she suffered in being a double victim. Instead, the lover in the poem just left her, callously adding to her troubles. This fact made the mood of the poem sad.

This mood of sadness, carried by the poem "Misery", is quickly turned into hilarity at the consideration of what the persona in the poem decided to do about her problem. She decided to go and listen to blues, meaning that she wanted to evade her own troubles by listening to another person's trouble. Blues is intended to be a song that tells sad stories. Only sad stories can render the listener's mood sad. The other requirement attached to blues is that these stories must be laugh-provoking. It is a painful experience to be deserted by one's lover. Going to a bar is probably not a decent way to overcome such disappointment. Even if it is to laugh it out by listening to blues. Such a move can be interpreted as a pretext to go out and to have a good time. A cabaret is often perceived as a den of vice. Besides, the persona confessed that her lover was a good for nothing. A bad partner did not deserve to be missed when he went away. Rather it should be an occasion to rejoice. The loss was not worth it.

The poem "Gal's Cry for a Dying Lover" by Hughes (Hughes, "Gal's Cry for a Dying Lover": p. 110) is another poem patterned like blues. Similar to "Misery", there are the two repeated verses that rhyme with a third one. For instance "heard the owl a hooting",/Knowed somebody's 'bout to die." (lines 1 and 2) and "heard the owl a hooting",/Knowed somebody's 'bout to die." (lines 3 and 4) rhyme with "Put ma head un'neath de kiver,/Started in to moan an' cry." (lines 5 and 6). "Black an' ugly/But he sho do treat me kind." (lines 13 and 14) "I'm black and ugly/ But he sho do treat me kind." (lines 15 and 16) equally rhyme with "High-in-heaben Jesus,/Please don't take this man o' mine. This is another sad poem that deals with a young girl who was about to lose a person who did care for her. The persona in the poem can be said to

be really desperate. The arguments she used in her pleading showed it. She was black and ugly. Being a black girl in itself constituted a problem for her. A black girl at the time was probably a poor and destitute person. She was regarded as an inferior creature and should have expected to be treated as such. On average black girls in the Americas had enormous difficulties escaping their stereotype as sexual objects. Back in their days of slavery, many of their masters used to have children with them. As soon as they delivered their children they faced two fates. The children were taken away from them and they were made to face harder times in the house because of the wrath of the master's wife. The luckier ones were allowed to attend to their children. However these children were not supposed to know who their father was. Of course, some of these children did end up suspecting who their father was.

This is the case of Frederick Douglass (See *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*). In cases where female slaves were impregnated by fellow men slaves, the couple was quickly separated and the child taken away from the mother at a young age. It was as if black women were useful only as sexual objects. Deborah Gray White noted that:

The conditions under which bonded women lived and worked helped imprint the Jezebel image on the white mind, but traders and owners also consciously and unconsciously created an environment which ensured female slave behavior that would fulfill their expectations. The choice put before many slave women was between miscegenation and the worst experiences that slavery had to offer...Some women, therefore, took the risk involved and offered themselves. When they did so, they breathed life into the image of Jezebel.

(White, *Aren't I a Woman?*: pp.33-34).

This perception of black women seemed to have survived the time of slavery. Perhaps this is one reason why black females were seen as morally loose by white people in the United States. Hughes in the poem, "Listen here Blues", gave the following warning:

Good girls, good girls,  
Listen here to me.  
Oh, you good girls,  
Better listen to me:  
Don't you fool wid no men cause  
They'll bring you misery.  
(Hughes, C.W.I: pp.112-13).

It can be said therefore that the persona in the poem was fortunate enough to have somebody who was not treating her like a sexual object. Paula Giddings showed that the difficult economic situation proved to be a factor of strain on marital relations among Blacks. According to her, Discrimination pushed black women to get more educated to stand a chance to get away from domestic jobs. By contrast, the great majority of black men were excluded from better-paying jobs. According to McDougald cited by Giddings, this situation of less salary earner created a complex among black men who were bent on showing that they were the head of the house. By behaving in that way they made life difficult for their families. A second factor that weakened male-female relationship in black communities, according to Giddings, was the apparent higher number of black women, especially in big cities where they got well-paid jobs because of their education. For her, referring to findings of a study, in an environment where there are more women than men, these latter are not willing to make lasting commitments (See Paula Giddings's *When and Where I Enter*). The persona in Hughes's poem said her lover cared for her. There was a great chance that after the death of her lover she might not find any caring lover again. This probable imminent outcome is what makes the poem sad.

Despite the fact that the poem makes its reader feel bad, the latter could not help laughing because of what was at the root of her worries. The girl was convinced of the imminent death of her lover by merely hearing a bird sing. This is utterly ridiculous for the rational mind. If somebody has to die anytime an owl sings, then there would probably be no more human beings on earth. The belief that somebody is going to die when an owl sings in a certain way can be said to be a superstition,

an occurrence that science could not explain. It is possible that an owl could sing in that manner but nothing would happen. Besides, such a belief might not be widespread. Therefore the persona's anguish about the imminent death of her lover can provoke laughing.

The persona's desperate call to Jesus to intervene and spare the life of the lover could be equally laugh-provoking. People with rational minds might perceive the persona as a naïve character because she believed in the fact that Jesus could do something for her. Just like the belief in superstition, Christianity is sometimes considered as a great deception that takes advantage of weaker personalities. The Marxist philosopher Karl Marx referred to religion as the opium of the people. He most probably meant that instead of rolling their sleeves up and put in more effort to leave their poverty behind, church members are satisfied with the prospect of going to heaven when they die. The belief is that it is the lot of these poor persons to suffer here on earth. When they die, they would go to heaven as a reward for their sufferings while on earth. So for Marxists, people who go to church can be said to be under a spell that prevents them from using their brain, just like drug users feel temporary happiness when they are under the effects of the drugs. The persona in the poem can be seen as a fool who believed in Jesus and thus become a laughing stock.

Composing poems following the pattern of gospel music was another innovation that Hughes brought to the world of poetry. The poems are full of repetitions. Gospel music typically utilizes a great deal of repetition because of its origin of oral tradition. This repetition is a way of encouraging group participation. In fact, it allows those who could not read the opportunity to participate in worship. The second major characteristic of these poems is that they express hope for a better future. This is so because the four gospels of the Bible portray Jesus as a leader of a group of disciples who performed miracles and preached in Jerusalem. He was crucified and rose from the dead. Just like Jesus started humbly and ended as a great figure, these poems express the hope that though Blacks started as slaves there is hope that they could end as achievers of tomorrow. The following poem, "Moan" written by Hughes sheds more light on this point.

I'm deep in trouble,  
Nobody to understand,  
    Lord, Lord!  
Deep in trouble,  
Nobody to understand,  
    O, Lord!  
Gonna pray to ma Jesus,  
Ask him to gimme His hand.  
    Ma Lord!  
I'm moanin', moanin',  
Nobody cares just why.  
    No, Lord!  
Moanin', moanin',  
Feels like I could die.  
    O, Lord!  
Sho, there must be peace,  
    Ma Jesus,  
Somewhere in yo' sky.  
    Yes, Lord!

(Hughes, C.W.I: p.95).

The racial identity of the persona in the poem was not clearly disclosed in the poem. However it can be presumed to be a black person because of the use of Black English usually attributed to Blacks. Blacks were perceived by Hughes as a victimized population in the US. He wrote many poems depicting the wretched conditions inflicted on Blacks and how difficult it was for them to make a decent living in the US. In the present poem he seemed to reject the racial conception that the Black race was a cursed race. He expressed his conviction that there was a place where Blacks might lead a life that would be free of harassment for them, even if that place had to be heaven. This is the hope that the poem exhibits. In terms of repetitions there are many of them in the poem. Here are some examples: "I'm deep in trouble,/ Nobody to understand,/ Lord, Lord! (lines 1-3); "Deep in trouble,/ Nobody to understand,/ O, Lord!" (lines 4-6).



“Prayer Meeting” can also be said to be a poem written after the gospel pattern by Hughes. The poem featured repetitions as well as a message of hope for a better future. The poem is about an old black woman at a prayer meeting. During the meeting she kept rejoicing at the idea that she would soon wear her crown. She probably believed in the controversial Christian idea that those who suffer on earth would go to Heaven when they die. The poem reads:

Glory! Halleluiah!  
De dawn’s a-comin’!  
Glory! Halleluiah!  
De dawn’s a-comin’!  
A black old woman croons  
In the amen-corner of the  
Ebecanezer Baptist Church.  
A black old woman croons,—  
De dawn’s a-comin’!  
(Hughes, C.W.I: pp.92-93).

If Jesus’s injunction: “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God” were to find fulfillment, then the old woman in the poem was right when she was rejoicing about her future death. She would live a happy life after she died. The conditions made to black people in the US during and after slavery did not allow them to enjoy a decent living. Therefore the old black woman might have been one of those Blacks whose poor conditions Hughes and McKay deplored in many of their poems. Now that she was going to die because she was old, she would step into that Kingdom of God where everybody would be happy. In this poem also there are many repetitions. Here are some examples: “Glory! Halleluiah!/De dawn’s a-comin’!/Glory! Halleluiah!/De dawn’s a-comin’! (lines 1-4).

Really, Hughes can be said to have brought important innovation to the world of poetry in his time. He was able to do so because he was willing to tap from his black culture. These innovations concern writing poems patterned after Blues and Gospel. He also showed admirable bravery by including in the themes of his poetry black people’s

experience. In fact it can be said that he successfully evidenced the fact that Blacks are human beings, especially when reference is made to what Thomas Jefferson wrote in "Notes on the State of Virginia": "Never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration, never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture" (Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory").

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