

# Harlem Renaissance Crisis in the Poetry of Langston Hughes

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قضية "نهضة مدينة هارليم" في شعر لانكستون هيوز

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## **ABSTRACT:-**

The present study aims at shedding the light on the works of Langston Hughes (1901-1967) who gained great reputation for his opinions and attitudes concerning the Harlem Renaissance Crisis and the struggle of the view point of the "Black". Hughes wrote novels, short stories, essays, and plays. He wanted to clearly portray the joys and hardships of working-class black people, regardless of emotional attitudes and worthless beliefs.

**Key Words:** Langston Hughes, Harlem Renaissance, "I Dream a World"

## **المخلص:**

تهدف الدراسة الحالية الى تسليط الضوء على اعمال وشعر لانكستون هيوز (1901-1967) الذي اكتسب شهرة واسعة نتيجة لافكاره واتجاهاته فيما يتعلق بمشكلة نهضة مدينة هارليم والجدال حول مفهوم "الاسود". ويعد هيوز شخصية هامة وبارزة في موضوع حركة نهضة هارليم التي ظهرت كحركة فكرية وادبية فعالة في بدايات القرن العشرين. وكشاعر مهم فقد قدم هيوز العديد من الروايات والقصص القصيرة والمقالات والمسرحيات وكان يهدف من خلالها الى توضيح المعاناة التي تعيشها الطبقة العاملة من السود في مطلع القرن العشرين بغض النظر عن الافكار والمعتقدات السلبية للمجتمع آنذاك.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** لانكستون هيوز، نهضة هارليم، قصيدة "احلم بعالم".

## Section One: Introduction

### 1.1 Langston Hughes: (1 February 1901 – 22 May 1967) Life and Career

Being the son of African American family in Joplin- Missouri, Langston Hughes is regarded one of the founders of the African American art and the Harlem Renaissance tradition. He produced poetry, short stories and dramatic plays for the first time when he was a student in high school in Cleveland, Ohio. After that he traveled between West Africa and Europe spending most of the 1920s between Paris and England. (H. Draper, 2013: 43)

In 1924, Hughes went back to the United States specifically to Harlem after being graduated from Lincoln University in 1929. He published his first poem *The Crisis* in 1921 in addition to his first publication of poetry, *The Weary Blues* in 1926. Hughes' most important work focused on a racial discrimination without hate. His publication *The Nation* in 1926 is regarded the perfect manifestation of the issues of the Harlem Renaissance: (Ibid)

“The 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 doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly, too. The tom-tom cries, and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves.” (qtd. In Draper,2013:51)

Not only poetry, Hughes wrote novels, short stories, plays, operas, essays, works for children, and an autobiography. Sexual subjects were also dedicated to Hughes' opinions. Arnold Rampersad, a critic and biographer, once claims that American African men were preferable for Hughes and this may be due to his political and social intentions for giving a wider freedom for the Black. ([http:// Langston Hughes / National Museum of African American History and Culture.si.edu](http://LangstonHughes/NationalMuseumofAfricanAmericanHistoryandCulture.si.edu)).

However, the 1920s and 1930s witnessed the emergence of the ideas of Harlem Renaissance resulting in rising the Black artists. During that period, Hughes appeared as one of the central figures

who paved the way for other fellow poets to call for the voice of Black art and thus his role was great in marking the artistic world of the Black. (Sara, Kettler, 2019: 10).

Hughes responds to an article entitled "The Negro-Art Hokum" written by the editor of a Black paper in Pittsburgh George Schuyler in 1926, which supposed that the Negro or Black art was only a completion or an addition to European arts and thus it needs not to be separated or having a separate identity. In that response which was entitled "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", Hughes showed how racial identity was like a mountain which restricts Black artists' motivations to have their independent art or philosophy or even search a particular view-point. (<https://www.biography.com/news/langston-hughes-harlem-renaissance>)

Moreover, Hughes caused the existence of a new type of art which mixed jazz and blue music. This results in his views of the blues form in his poetry collection "The Weary Blues" in 1926. Next he published what describes the lives of the Black away from upper and middle classes. Such work with others pointed out to the struggle between Black and White writers specially when the White considered the writings of the Black as "low" or negative attitudes of poetry as mentioned by one White writer describing Hughes as "the poet low-rate of Harlem". While this view was regarded as an attack to principles of freedom and Black voice. (Ibid)

To some extent, Hughes was different. He was the poet of the Harlem Renaissance although he did not live there during the crisis of Harlem. Yet his views were unique. He travelled for remote places for searching different perspectives. This enables him to be a wide and open-minded poet. In 1923, Hughes was on a ship sailing to the west coast of Africa where he met a member of the Kru tribe telling him that he is a White not a Black one. Such attitudes emphasized how Hughes had a unique and independent personality enabling him to be the voice of the Black but from an opened and free attitude. Moreover, Hughes' travel to Paris in 1924 gave him the chance to meet some of the Black jazz musicians in addition to many white sailors who influenced him to write his energetic poem "I, Too" to illustrate his hope that the unequal condition between the Black and White came to an end. Between 1925 and 1926, Hughes was active

as an artist. He went back to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, then he was back to Harlem where he met a group of artists including Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Bennett and Aaron Douglas with whom he formed a separate group . (Kettler, 12).

This group intended to produce a magazine Fire!!, which aimed to express the intentions and activities of young Black artists. This came in response to what restrictions mentioned in magazines like the NAACP's Crisis magazine. Since they tried to discuss wider subjects like race and sex. For Hughes, the matter was more than a subject in a magazine. He attempted to express all what he believed to be fruitful for their issue of the Harlem Renaissance. He did whatever he thought possible for spreading their own views and attitudes. This was clear in his autobiography The Big Sea (1940), where Hughes wrote a whole section entitled "Black Renaissance." This also was a reason behind changing the name of period from "Negro Renaissance" to "Harlem Renaissance. (Ibid)

## 1.2 Harlem Renaissance: A short Survey

Hughes was considered as a “jazz poet” during the jazz era or Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. He was insistent to reflect the voice of the ordinary Black people and their suffering. His writings show his great emphasis on the jazz and blues music by which he could investigate the spiritual side of the Black life and thus he was able to reflect the essence of their belief. As a matter of fact, Hughes attempted to reflect a picture of complete cultural heritage of a whole community of the Black and this was obviously shown in his Montage, (1951), which contains eighty-seven poems all descriptive of Harlem Renaissance values and perspectives. (Christine Dualé, 2018: 2). Regardless of anything, Hughes remained consistent to views of the Harlem Renaissance making of it the major subject of his literary career. The conflict between the Black and White was very highlighted in his poetry along with his emphasis on the raising of the Black art. (Ibid)

During the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance movement appeared as an African-American artistic and intellectual movement which represented a voice for turning the direction towards the life and attitudes of the African-Americans. Their heritage and tradition

caused many changes in society resulting in the emergence of a new and invented style of poetry describing the Black. Of course this movement came to refer to a whole nation of Black people who came as immigrants from southern to northern cities to make a settlement in New York, Chicago, and Detroit. And of course many lived in Harlem to form a nation. (Duale, 3)

Such movement like the Harlem Renaissance did not come aimlessly. Its own adopters were thinkers and artists who sought to win the fight calling for their rights in legal ways. The city of Harlem becomes a center for bringing the African-American culture into ground and searching a generation ready to have the principles of the movement. It reached the climax in the 1920s and 1930s. The writers of the movement insisted on showing their beliefs and perspectives regardless of all restrictions. Thus they manifest a new different style of writing expressing the direction of the Black. The expressionist style was created and used by those writes of the Harlem Renaissance. They adopt that art of dark colors and jazz music. As referred to in critic Jr. Dodson's comment: "At the beginning of the 20th century, black people were believed to have no history or culture". (Duale,4-6). Artists of the movement were not only poets and writers, but even painters like William Henry Johnson who remained practicing his job till the 1940s and 1950s. He used to translate whatever he saw into his paintings. He also came across different literary genres. (Amick, 2009: 2). Furthermore, the search for their identity and the roots of this culture which springs from Africa was included in the art of this movement. The sketches of African tradition including scenes of tribes and jungles. This even added to the history and tradition of this culture. The entertaining factors were also highlighted in Harlem city presenting clubs for entertainment especially the famous Cotton Club of Harlem. (Amick, 2-3)

During the Harlem Renaissance, however, literature specifically poetry gained a significant part. Publications like Sterling A. Brown "Southern Railroad", Claude McKay's "Harlem Shadows" and Weldon Johnson, for example, produced poetry which describes the essence of the movement. Advocating the issues and arts of the new Negro revolution. (Ibid, 5)

### 1.3 Langston Hughes and The Harlem Renaissance

A significant and prolific poet like Langston Hughes has a great

impact on other fellow writers of the age. Having a wide knowledge of many topics and directions. Hughes left behind him an essential art of jazz music. His poem “A Dream Deferred”, which is indicative, to some extent, issues of the Civil Rights Movement carrying behind its lines a revolutionary sense during the 1950s and 1960s. Below are some of the lines extracted from this poem:

'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?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?'

(qtd, in. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/145704/an-introduction-to-the-harlem-renaissance>)

In addition to that, certain voices appeared to the stage to stress the emphasis on the Black art and the new Harlem tradition. One of these voices was that of the Intellectual and activist Du Bois also played a major role in the Harlem Renaissance. Bois' The Souls of Black Folk and Black Reconstruction in America were best examples of the progression and activities this critic produced to be indulged within the artistic movement of Harlem. A brilliant civil rights advocate, Du Bois helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Two of Du Bois' most famous works are The Souls of Black Folk, and his magnum opus Black Reconstruction in America. As the editor of the NAACP's extremely influential journal The Crisis, Du Bois had the opportunity to publish many important pieces of literature from Harlem Renaissance writers. Some of the slogans of Harlem Renaissance

were in some way similar or in agreement to American white revolutionaries in their beliefs and viewpoints concerning the big change of social reform due to the great depression. The views of the Black, thus, were welcomed during that time and this was, of course, the active role of the Black thinkers and artists. (Ibid)

The crisis of the Harlem Renaissance represents a very crucial step in the literary and social history of American tradition. Such a movement did not only stand for the aims and voices of the Black but even it started to involve the whole literary thought of the Americans. This was a linking point that narrowed the gap between both the Black and the White resulting in a complete generation seeking social reformation. But the search for an independent Black national identity and part in American society led to the fall and decline of the Harlem Renaissance around the 1960s. (Carriero, 1997:11)

The movement of the Harlem Renaissance was not only standing on the active role of Black advocates and intellectuals, but also there used to be certain contributions from the part of white patronage who helped the Black writers financially to continue their activities. This co-operation between Black artists and the white patrons seems to have a great impact on the social and political developments and on finding the African American art. The search for an independent African American art was the aim of the Black intellectuals. It is only near the end of the Harlem Renaissance that the Black turned to join the CPUSA to establish and maintain their rights. (Carreiro, 12)

As far as Langston Hughes is concerned, his poetry was a subject of crucial importance. He wrote poetry that speaks about the everyday life and details of Black people. Critic Rampersad put it clear when announcing that Hughes' works must be appreciated because of its heavy concern with the suffering of the African American citizens and elaborating Hughes' opinions concerning the poet as a person lives and speaks the people's voice as he declares in Collected Poems of Langston Hughes, "To respect Hughes' work, above all one must respect the African American people and their culture as well as the American people in general and their national culture.... it is the human soul entire, squeezed like a lemon or a lime, drop by drop, into atomic words. A poet is a human being; each human being must live within his time, with and for his people, and within the boundaries of his country." (Ibid)

Moreover, the role of music was great for Langston Hughes. His music was considered an indication of a whole community. In other words, it showed Hughes' extreme belief in the issues of the Harlem Renaissance and its subjects. He believed that the Black music, the Blues, and the jazz became a part of his own identity. He regarded Black music as a very inspiring thing that added to his identity as African American poet. His poetry resembled a kind of criticism for social norms and also representative of the colloquial language of Black people and their life style. (Ibid 14)

## **SECTION TWO: Harlem Renaissance Crisis in Langston Hughes' Poetry**

At his own time, Hughes was considered black when blackness was something shameful. Having emphasized the beauty of the Black, he tried to consider such topic like the acceptance of their color in deep levels. His poetry advocates such subjects as courage, rebellion and irony in addition to the struggle for freedom. It is a reflection of the African American tradition. He stressed the voice of people and their suffering in his poetry. The lines below are extracted from his poem My People. They show how color is not a cause for social discrimination and racial inequality. ([http:// poem hunter](http://poemhunter.com). Langston Hughes. Com: 83)

"My People":

The night is beautiful,

So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,

So the eyes of my people Beautiful,

also, is the sun.

Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.

(qtd, in. PoemHunter.com:84)

Hughes stressed a racial consciousness and cultural nationalism devoid of self-hate that united people of African American culture. Hughes was conscious of writing for the sake people he lived with. He, thus, represented a source of inspiration for other fellow artists of his own time. Black writers such as Jacques Roumain, Nicolás

Guillén, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Aimé Césaire used to follow Hughes' style and be under his own views. Not only this, but even other activities of Hughes reflect his talents and roles as a poet of African American identity. For example, he made a collaboration with French artists who belonged to African origins like Rene Maran and Leon Damas. Hughes' poetry, furthermore, was characterized by jazz music and folk language that identify the African American direction. His poetry was published in the CPUSA journal and it involved some of Hughes' contributions in some Communist organizations which serve his purposes. In addition to his political opinions and activities. He, even, travelled to Spain in 1937 for political purposes which deal with the struggle for African American rights. Even the contribution of the Blacks in the World War II was not welcomed by Hughes, yet he supported that contribution for rights of the Black. The following lines from Hughes' "Cross" narrate some points of the Blacks' struggle to have their rights:

My old man's a white old man  
And my old mother's black.  
If ever I cursed my white old man  
I take my curses back.  
If ever I cursed my black old mother  
And wished she were in hell,  
I'm sorry for that evil wish And now I wish her well  
My old man died in a fine big house.  
My ma died in a shack.  
I wonder where I'm going to die,  
Being neither white nor black?  
(qtd, in . PoemHunter.com: 24)

The detailed descriptions of color presented in the poem are essential for Hughes' aim for criticizing social discrimination and race injustice. Such technical method of differentiating the Black and white reinforces the theme of dehumanization and degradation. Particularly, the exploitation of young children who were treated violently:

What's a body but a toy?

Juicy bodies Of nigger wenches Blue black Against black fences.

O, you little bastard boy,

What's a boy but a toy? (qtd, in . Wood: 11)

Due to the Great Depression after World war II and the great influence American White writers have on the Black African American at that time, Hughes and other Intellectuals of Harlem were very insistent on preserving the rights of the Black and narrowing the gap between them. Specifically, the emergence of a new generation of the Negro was the main and major aim of the Harlem Renaissance culture and its adopters. The following extract is taken from Hughes' poem I Dream A World which sums up the world Hughes dreams to have as the African American society. A world which brings the rights and justice for Blacks. The African Americans who suffered a lot to achieve their dream of a world of equality and freedom.

### **I Dream A World**

I dream a world where man

No other man will scorn,

Where love will bless the earth

And peace its paths adorn

I dream a world where all

Will know sweet freedom's way,

Where greed no longer saps the soul

Nor avarice blights our day.

A world I dream where black or white,

Whatever race you be,

Will share the bounties of the earth

And every man is free,

Where wretchedness will hang its head

And joy, like a pearl,

Attends the needs of all mankind

Of such I dream, my world!

(qtd, in. PoemHunter.com: 56)

The poem, thus, like other works of Hughes attempts to constitute a community independent in its aims and beliefs. The search for equality and human rights were the major concerns for the African American writers. According to the poem, the world that Hughes dreams of is a perfect world which spreads freedom all over the world. In such world the Black and the White are to be equal while enjoying the pleasures of the earth. Justice and equal treatment are the simple rights Black people want to have. It does not matter whether one's color is Black or White since they live in one country and have the same rights. The humanistic view should be emphasized and highlighted with the African American people.

(<https://poemanalysis.com/langston-hughes/i-dream-a-world-by-langston-hughes/>)

## CONCLUSION

Among the many writers and thinkers who wrote about Harlem Renaissance poetry was Langston Hughes. This poet, in fact, was an influential figure in the Harlem Renaissance which represented a clear shift in the perception and the belief about African American art and its results. Hughes produced novels, short stories, essays, and plays. He aimed at showing the miserable and desperate conditions Black people lived in America during 1920s and 1930s. Hughes' poetry led to a new generation of fellow writers who believed in the concepts and dreams of their community. Thus, it is important to see the way Hughes' views and poetry put a spiritual steps for others to follow and consider.

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