

THE COMMON THEMES OF LIBERATION VICTORY IN CLAUDE MCKAY'S AND LANGSTON HUGHES POETRY

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ABSTRACT

The study sought liberation victory in protest literature of Claude M'ckay's and Langston Hughes. The two prolific poets: Claude M'ckay and Langston Hughes were key figures in the Harlem renaissance movement. Their writing majorly comprised of poems focusing on the disdain of racial divide, slavery and oppression. Precisely, Claude M'ckay and Langston Hughes composed verses as a bellow for identity and more so as a cry for liberation victory. The study assumed that Claude M'ckay's and Langston Hughes' poetry was influenced by the simple fact that these authors were infused with racial pride and great sense of their African heritage for which they laboured to liberate from bondage. The study deployed a qualitative research design whereby the researcher undertook to collect non-numerical data through critical reading of the core poems. The reader response theory informed the interpretation of the works as far as liberation victory in protest literature` is concerned. The study was a library based thriving on content analysis of both primary and secondary data to assess the various elements yielding liberation victory in protest literature during the Harlem Renaissance revolution. The study established that unlike other poems, Claude M'ckay's and Langston Hughes' poetry easily conveys the critical message of the liberation victory. It was revealed that in writing their poems; Claude M'ckay's and Langston Hughes propose total freedom and perform rigorously to achieve it. Whereas Hughes uplifts the black race by bringing in positive visuals of strength and prosperity, McKay ironically emphasises the hidden darkness in the lives of black people and forces them to fight for liberation victory not yet fully estimated. Generally, Claude M'ckay's and Langston's poetry depicts resilience and beauty of the African American struggle. These gurus pioneered the beautiful event that was the Harlem Renaissance so that we could see what we see today: the liberation victory. Therefore, the study concluded that the main themes in Harlem renaissance poetry performance were those geared towards freeing the 'Negro' upon which the study recommends that like in case of Paul Laurence Dunbar's "*We wear the mask*" literary critics should cherish a "double consciousness" that existed during the Harlem Renaissance among the black people of America and that, which is needed tomorrow to ensure that the race shall not suffer second slavery. Further studies could as well focus on liberation victory in African American prose narratives. What were the common themes in protest Literature in Langston Hughes and Claude 's M'ckay's poetry?

The Common Themes of Liberation Victory in Claude McKay's and Langston Hughes Poetry

Katie (2014) states that in Claude McKay's sonnets, there is a deep sense of confusion and even sometimes anger over his identity within a growing America. He seems to stick to a (mostly) perfect Shakespearian sonnet form, expressing himself and his thoughts to a confined language. It seems as though he stuck to this specific form to allow his poetry to be far-reaching and understandable by other poets of his day, namely white poets. McKay was sticking himself into a certain form while being conflicted about his own self and racial identity. We see this in *The Harlem Dancer*, *The Lynching*, *The White City*, and *America*; McKay's juxtaposition of his racial identity against the already set "racial identity" known in America. He always seems to be comparing his blackness to America's whiteness, or vice versa. McKay is placing himself and his poetry within an already set paradigm, and he doesn't seem to be breaking free of that.

Seonghyun Kim (2018) agrees that Langston Hughes, on the other hand, immediately writes in no set poetic structure and without comparing his racial identity to anyone else. In his poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, Hughes speaks of himself as if his own identity is the whole of African Americans. He states "I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it."

He speaks of himself as encompassing his entire race, and he is not putting his race in comparison to another race. Hughes captures the proudness and strength of his race, which would help to kick off the beginnings of the Harlem Renaissance, which was critical for African American culture. Hughes does seem to exemplify a more free way of writing, which allows him to write more openly about his identity within the black culture.

This researcher therefore sought to identify the themes in the works of both poets without considering why (some) keep reoccurring, how the black people were directly affected by their relevance to the liberation victory in the Harlem renaissance and how liberation victory was achieved in other words.

The Common Themes of Liberation Victory in Claude McKay's and Langston Hughes Poetry

As described in their works, both Hughes and McKay share similar subject matters in poems. They both have suffered from racial discrimination and finally argued against the circumstances through their work. Moreover, both of them focus on portraying bleak lives of the black. Among the themes explored, I believe the importance of their poems are nonconformity, freedom, and hope.

Nonconformity

Nonconformity is the failure or compliance with, to a prevailing rule or practice. First of all, Claude McKay's "If We Must Die," expresses a sense of nonconformity by representing whites as foe and monster. Langston Hughes also tells the readers not to conform by writing a phrase "I guess being coloured doesn't make me not like the same things other folks like who are other races." Moreover, Hughes' "Harlem" includes the idea that the dream, which is to gain freedom and equality, has

potential to be real. McKay's "America" both criticizes mocking toward blacks and shows the possibility to have a better future.

Biographically, McKay was a communist and we can see his propensity of communism through his two poems, where he refers Caucasians as "tiger," "foe" and his own race as "pig." Also, he strongly emphasizes his hatred toward the society, which many communists used to do. In his poem "If We Must Die," he emphasizes to fight with whites and in "America," he mentions the society as "cultured hell." However, he also asserts that the blacks have hope for their dream. In his poem "America," he wrote a phrase "Giving me strength to erect against her hate," showing that blacks have enough potential to fight against those who discriminate African-Americans. The impression created in the poem is one of a brewing war. McKay urges his people to fight bravely regardless of whether they die or not; and death is likely. It seems his people are overpowered and it is them who look as if they are being hunted, hence the need to retaliate. By using the ritual of hunting as an image, we observe from traditions that the purpose is to kill, as it turns out when one is hunting an animal. In such a circumstance, there are no rules of engagement and every means is welcome. The imagined enemy is using force to fight and force must also be used against them. There is a call to never give up. "Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back", is a scenario common in war.

Hughes's "I too" best describes the discrimination they face. They smiled and endured the unfair treatment. They were difficult from childhood to adulthood. The poem says we'll be able to lay claim to our rights in the future, and white people will be ashamed of themselves. It seems to show a strong faith and courage that one day there will be no racial discrimination.

McKay's poems present a political point of view as a supporter of blacks. He experienced racism by white people, he wanted a place in American society where blacks could have power. He always supported blacks and wanted racial equality.

They all embody some sort or part of the renaissance itself. "The Weary Blues" refers to the hardships and problems before, and "I Too" and "If We Must Die" shows that the black people aren't willing to sit by and watch their destiny unfold.

Finally, Hughes and McKay used a similar theme about experiencing racism. In addition, both focus on portraying the lives of African Americans. They have put ideas of resistance against white people throughout the city. It was about portraying the horrible quality of life to blacks and gaining racial equality for blacks.

Freedom

This is the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants. Reading Hughes and McKay, I was strongly reminded of DuBois' concept of the black double-consciousness, and the pressure to have both a black and an 'American' identity. For example, in "America", McKay seems to be adhering to more traditional, 'white' ideas of poetry (specifically the Shakespearian sonnet), but the poem itself is strongly tied to black identity issues. The poet suggests that he's very much tied to

America, as when he says that “Her vigour flows like tides into my blood,” but he doesn’t shy away from acknowledging America as an enemy; America “sinks into my throat with her tiger’s tooth,” and the poet is “a rebel” confronting “a king in state.” Judging from McKay’s poetry, and this poem in particular, he largely confronts the “double-consciousness” issue by aligning himself primarily with blacks, and by viewing ‘America’ as too predominantly white to ever welcome him in.

In Langston Hughes’ work, though, most poems seem to revolve around finding a place for the black identity within the American identity; where McKay often seems to suggest that the two are irreconcilable, Hughes seems to be taking after Whitman and framing himself as a new voice for America. For instance, we can look at “I, Too”, where Hughes imagines a near future where he, a black poet, will be part of the American ‘family’; “Tomorrow, I’ll be at the table When company comes. Besides, They’ll see how beautiful I am And be ashamed— I, too, am America.” Or, looking at “Note on Commercial Theatre”, Hughes begins by lamenting the white theft and corruption of black culture, but then says, “But someday somebody will Stand up and talk about me, And write about me—Black and beautiful— And sing about me, And put on plays about me! I reckon it’ll be Me myself! Yes, it’ll be me.” Or again in “Theme for English B”, where Hughes reflects that “You are white— yet a part of me, as I am a part of you. That’s American.” Hughes is no less concerned than McKay about preserving black identity, but Hughes seems to be just as concerned about recognizing how much blacks are already a part of ‘America’. In this poem “I, Too, Sing America,” freedom is the big goal. By refusing to buckle under the awful pressures of slavery and oppression, the speaker moves ever closer towards eventual freedom and racial equality. He's looking forward to the day America fulfils her promise of freedom. There's something to be said for mental freedom, too – the speaker firmly believes that he (and his race) is equal to white Americans. Though he is treated poorly, he knows his value and doesn't allow his mind to be imprisoned. It's all about conviction, here. It's the way to freedom.

In the poem ‘Lynching’ McKay writes: "All night a bright and solitary star (Perchance the one that ever guided him, Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)." The poem makes reference to the North Star that slaves in the South used as navigational guidance when trying to escape to the North. When McKay states that the star is perhaps the only one that has ever guided him, he is also making reference to the man's life conditions prior to being lynched. A common practice in slavery was breaking up families. This meant children were separated from parents at a young age, wives and husbands were sold to different plantations, and siblings were broken up at a whim, whether for punishment or for financial gain for the slave owners. Therefore, it is likely that the man had no family left and only the North Star to guide him.

On the other hand, the poem ‘America’ by Claude McKay discusses a complex relationship between the nation-state and the disenfranchised. With the vampiric image of America drinking the speaker's blood and stealing his "breath of life," the opening lines of the poem establish the premise that the "mother country" feeds off the bodies of its marginalized populations, needing them to sustain itself even as it continues to oppress them. In a similarly paradoxical way, the speaker refers

to America's "vigour" giving him "strength erect against her hate," highlighting a strange dependency where the speaker needs America's antagonism to fuel his own masculine potency. McKay hints at the outcome of this antagonism in the poem's foreboding finale, which implies that the same "strength erect" that America generates in the speaker will eventually lead to her own downfall. Yet, in a perfect summation of this complex and ambivalent relationship, the speaker is only able to predict this demise because of his own status as an outsider, and he does not treat it as a cause for celebration. While the speaker even in the final lines cannot help but "love" America for its "wonders" and its utopian promise of freedom, McKay's poem unequivocally shows how that promise has never been fulfilled, ultimately suggesting that the relationship between America and its marginalized groups remains powerfully fraught and deeply ambivalent.

Throughout "Harlem Shadows," McKay is telling the young girls to express their natural sexuality freely, but to find a different way. The behaviour that they are displaying is more disgraceful and should not be considered Black culture. McKay shows how the girls have lost their innocence and spread the black culture to the white race, yet McKay implies that their idea of the culture is tainted as the girls themselves are. Claude McKay makes reference to his example being the girl's saving grace to the true black culture and each girl's true identity. However, in his message McKay has to make the girls exoticized and objectified before he can explain the way to change and the ultimate survival. By objectifying the girl's McKay attaches his poem along with the rest of the writers at the time. He is writing the same topic of exoticism, black culture, and resuscitation from a lost and confused existence.

The poem *If We Must Die* by McKay serves as a protest against the whites and an act of encouragement for all coloured people. At the time, coloured people were denied the basic human rights that all white men have. In *If We Must Die*, McKay tells his comrades that they should stand up for their freedom and fight back against the whites. McKay wrote this poem as an English sonnet, meaning the poem consists of fourteen lines, quatrain and couplet rhyme scheme, and lines 14 and 15 are a heroic couplet - iambic pentameter.

Hope

Hope is a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen. In the poem "Mother to Son" Langston Hughes is trying to give the idea of hope and encouragement to move forward in life no matter what kind of difficulties humans might face along with his journey of living. The mother in the poem is trying to advise her young son that "Life for" (I. 2.) her "ain't been no crystal stair." (I. 2.). That means it wasn't easy to live and survive all this time. She tells him that "It's had tacks in it, And splinters, And boards torn up, And places with no carpet on the floor" (IV. 3-6.). The mother explained to her son that not everything was available for her comfort, and she said to him "Bare" (I. 7.) that lives off poor people and to bear that kind of condition that she had gone through. With all those hardships she kept "climbin' on, And reachin' landin's, And turnin' corners, And sometimes goin' in the dark where there ain't been no light"(V. 9-13.). She was struggling all the time to stay alive bearing all the hardship she faces and asking her son to be like her, a fighter to keep living. The word light there has two meanings, the first one is the visible

light, and the other one is the lack of guidance that has been sometimes missing through her process of struggling. The poetic speaker uses “crystal stair”(I. 2.) as a metaphor to describe how difficult her life was but even though she kept climbing that stair to stay alive with her son and now she’s teaching and encouraging him what she has learned from her experience.

In Langston Hughes' "I, Too", the speaker in the poem is a young black male. Throughout this entire poem the speaker expresses great hope about his peoples' future. He seems to think that very soon, during his time, there would have been a drastic change in the way that his people were treated. "Tomorrow, I'll be at the table" (Hughes 8/9), shows his confidence that his people would be treated as equals in a very short time period. In the last line of the poem "I, too, am America." (Hughes 18) we can almost see the speaker's face beaming with pride. Another one of Langston Hughes' poems, "Dinner Guest: Me", written in 1965, is almost a continuation of "I, Too". The speaker in "Dinner Guest: Me" seems to be the same one, except this time that pride that we saw in his face is gone. Now instead of being confident about "Tomorrow's" change, he sees that it is, and will take much longer than he had originally anticipated. The last two lines of the poem, "Solutions to the Problem, Of course, wait." (Hughes 22/23), tell us that this man who was once so proud of who he was is now so brainwashed by white propaganda that he refers to himself as a "Problem." We can however see that there were some differences since the ' I Too' but there should have been more over the forty years between the poems.

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