Social Protest and Lamentation in the Poetry of Langston Hughes

In the mid-1920’s, Langston Hughes emerged into the literary scene, immediately recognized as a prominent poet to watch. Over the next two decades, he became one of the most influential, and well-known poets of the Harlem Renaissance and beyond, making a name for himself even outside of the Black realm of poetry. Needless to say, he was a poet of the people, writing of life in Harlem and the challenges facing black people of the time. In his essay “‘Tomorrow’ in the Writings of Langston Hughes,” John W. Parker identifies three major motifs present in Hughes’ poems: “the primitivistic [sic] naturalism of the Harlem dweller, the propagandistic left-wing writing in support of a more articulate proletarian group, and the literature of protest against the social and economic maladjustments of the Negro people” (Parker 439). His poems of protest are immediately identifiable by their strong language and emotion, each one of them painting a stark picture of what America might be. In his poem, “I, Too,” Hughes uses subtle, symbolic, and powerful language to speak against oppressive race relations, not with a tone of confidence in the present, but hopeful dreaming for the future. He then leaves us, despite the resilient tone or attitude, with the realization of the difficulty of change. Here, I will explore how this poem can thus be seen as a lens in which to view a collection of other close readings of Hughes poems regarding race relations of his time. It can be concluded that Langston Hughes’ race poems lamenting the inequality Black people in America face are, like “I, Too,” poems of frustration, brutal honesty, and bitterness, tones that highlight
Hughes’ mood of uncertainty and doubt. This is represented by Hughes through his musings on the dream deferred, and the tomorrow of America, two ideas he revisits frequently in his poetry.

In reading, “I, Too,” one hears the voice of someone separated from the common being. This is the voice of someone on the outside. This is the voice of someone begging to be listened to, acknowledged, and embraced. With just the title, Langston Hughes displays for his readers the world in which he lives as a black man, and as an unrecognized soul. “I, Too,” the title of the poem and the words that begin and end the piece can be used as a stencil throughout, setting the mood in each stanza as one of longing, evoking the recognition of a vast gap of inequality. The words “I, too” immediately show the reader that this speaker is asking to be included. The first line of the poem is, “I, too, sing America.” Reading this, we see that the speaker does not identify himself with or as America, but apart from America. This separation does not mean the speaker wants to be identified separately; rather he is yearning to be identified with America.

Why sing? Why not dance? Or work? Sing implies celebration and a sense of freedom. Walt Whitman’s poem “I Hear America Singing” exalted the great brotherhood of America and it’s laborers. At Hughes’ time in history, white America as a nation was celebrating their liberty, identity, and community. The word “sing” in the context of this line can be read as the speaker asking to be included in that celebration.

The first full stanza of the poem tells us of what the speaker’s world looks like today (the “today” of the time the poem was written). The first line of the stanza, “I am the darker brother” tells us that this is the reason the speaker is set apart from America. He’s longing to be acknowledged as more than an outsider, and now, with an identity, we see that if he is the “darker brother”, the others must not be. In addition, “brother” correlates to the idea of family.

---

1 I use the pronoun “he” instead of “she” due to the reference of “darker brother”, implying that the speaker is male.
The speaker sees himself as a member of the symbolic family of America. Hughes goes on to portray the life of this family as one that sends “the darker brother” to “eat in the kitchen when company comes”. This is an action telling the speaker that they (his “family” or White America) are ashamed of him and do not deem him worthy to even be seen by his guests. He does not belong. As we saw from the beginning, with “I, too” he asserts that yes, indeed, he does belong and can act, does act, just like them, his white counterparts. The speaker also tells us that while away he will grow strong. Strong. Why is strength necessary? This implies that the speaker’s words are more than a request or a pleading or a disagreement over difference, but a fight; a fight that requires strength, where one can’t simply sit down and take things as they are. I will grow strong, to show you what I’m really made of.

In the next stanza, the tone shifts with the vision of tomorrow. Tomorrow, he will be at the table when company comes. “Nobody’ll dare say to me ‘Eat in the kitchen’ then”. At this point, the poem takes on a more aggressive tone, one moving away from a passive voice to an assertive one. This line comes off as a threat. The speaker is telling us that his oppressor, White America, will have something to be afraid of. They won’t dare send him away, because something might happen if they do. The title comes into play once more here in that the speaker is asserting his strength along with the rest of the American population. “I, too” have the power to entertain company, or eat at the table, or whatever the situation may be. “I, too” have the power to threaten.

But, the key word in this stanza is tomorrow. With such a shift in time and tone, one wonders, what happened in between the two stanzas? What happened in between the metaphorical “today” and “tomorrow”? This is where it begins to become clear that “tomorrow” is not a concrete, identifiable place, and this ambiguity continues to be present in many of
Hughes’ other poems. The speaker doesn’t know what is going to change to bring along this power, only that something must. “Tomorrow” may be next year, or in ten years, or a generation to come (which came to be true for this nation). The reader truly sees here, in a middle stanza, that this is still an imagined future, not one necessarily based in concrete, realistic predictions.

There is one more stanza before the last line of the poem that begins with “besides.” The word “besides” implies that what is to follow will modify or enhance what was before. When using the word “besides”, you might be implying ‘not only that, but this as well…If my first statement wasn’t true enough, this also reinforces what I just said, but in a different way.’ For Hughes, he is telling us, “they’ll see how beautiful I am and be ashamed.” Yes, they won’t dare defy me, but would that fear even be necessary with the state of my beauty? The speaker still has the power they established before, but with a softer tone. There is a hint of “isn’t it obvious?” in this sentence. It would be unthinkable to conceal the beauty of his being without shame. The speaker is telling us that he is something worth looking at, and also bringing the shame away from him to White America. Again, the title is applicable here in that the speaker is telling us that he is beautiful too; a beauty before unseen.

This statement of a distant future, a time that is not the present, makes it clear however that now, White America either does not see him and his beauty, or does not deem him beautiful to begin with. Which is worse: to be seen ugly, or to not be seen at all? Yes, in this final stanza the speaker is parading a sense of pride in his own beauty, but the last line is “And be ashamed”—is he not also in some way imploring White America to be ashamed of themselves? How could they even think to hide someone else’s beauty just because it is darker than they’re own? In the first stanza, the speaker carries the shame, but now, it is put to White America. Be
ashamed. You have been, and still are, living your lives blind. The time when they see how beautiful he is is not the (then) present.

The final line of the poem: “I, too, am America.” I am one of you. But I am sent away, prohibited from eating, breaking bread with my own family and our guests. Maybe, some day, my strength will bring me power and acknowledgment, but not today. This last line is parallel to the first. First he sings America, and then he is America. What’s the difference? The first one is more of a request, trying to convince others what he can do, what he is capable of. The last line is a declaration. He spends the poem identifying his place in the world, securing what it is he must accept as an identity and the last line, instead of to America, is for himself. This is what I am. It’s more desperate. A plea to convince his own mind, his own well-being—I am America, so why must I live this kind of life—segregated and racially discriminated against? If I am America, shouldn’t things be better?

With this exploration, the main themes present in Hughes’ total body of work are very clear: frustration with racial inequality, ambiguous conception of “tomorrow”, and the constant reaching for a new dream.

My exploration of Hughes’ writing on “dreams” can be encompassed into one basic interpretation: a dream that is vague and ambiguous, and not explicitly stated, though definitely present. It is also quite often recognized with a distinct difference of “today” and “tomorrow.” First, in his poem, “America”, Hughes writes,

“Little dark baby/Little Jew baby/Little outcast/America is seeking the stars, America is seeking tomorrow. You are America. I am America. America—the dream. America—the vision. America—the star-seeking I. Out of yesterday…”
In this vignette, it is clear to the reader that Hughes believes America is made up of people seeking a new life, a new world. Everyone is dreaming for something better, so America itself becomes a “star-seeking” place; consequently, it’s made clear that America must not have anything to offer its oppressed people if they must always be yearning for something better. Here, Hughes is telling us America is inadequate, thus his motif of frustration becomes present.

Furthermore, in “As I Grew Older” (93), Hughes writes, “It was a long time ago. I have almost forgotten my dream. But it was there, then, in front of me, bright like a sun—my dream.” In this poem, a wall is built up in front of the speakers dream and he cries for help in reaching his dream, the dream being an unidentified bright goal for the future. This can be representative of Hughes’ own opinion on the general lives of the black population in which they feel walls continually appear in front of the futures they strive for.

This idea is further continued in the poem “Dreams” in which he tells the readers to “hold fast to dreams/ for if dreams die/ life is a broken-winged bird.” And again in his poem “Teacher”: “Ideals are like the stars, always above our reach.” With each of these examples, it’s made clear that Hughes truly believes dreams play a huge role in the lives of African-Americans, and he is consistent in his representation of the dreams as an unclear goal, always to be held on to, though always out of reach. This tone interplays with Hughes’ other motif of more bitter frustration and protest. He is frustrated that his people must always be dreaming, and he is frustrated that these dreams must simply remain exactly that: dreams, that is all they can be, for their lives are so dire, so dismally oppressive, anything better is always out of reach.

Finally, Hughes’ poem “Let America Be America Again” brings all of these ideas together to represent a major theme in Hughes’ work.
“Let America be America again. Let it be the dream it used to be.” Here, we see that at one time, America was the place that was dreamed of, the bright and distant future goal. This is reiterated later with, “Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed.” And throughout the poem, it is repeated with slight variation, “America never was America to me.” This line showcases Hughes’ detachment from the country, and the distance that is in the forefront of “I, Too”. He writes, “…I came to build a ‘homeland of the free.’ The free? Who said the free? Not me?” Hughes clearly wishes to express that this country was not built for people like him. The beliefs that it stands upon are the very ways of life that leave his race at the bottom and with the lowest life-chances. “The free?” These two simple words carry a heavy tone of condescension and sarcasm. Under the oppression Blacks were facing, “free” was a word that simply didn’t mean the same thing.

Langston Hughes did not doubt the goodness of people. He didn’t believe the entire world was a bad place. But he recognized the blatant injustices present in his life, and the lives of African-Americans around him, and he used his poetry to speak out against these injustices. Through his poetry, spanning over years of his career, it is evident that he wrote with bitterness and frustration. His poems, veiled with an air of hopeful dreaming, told the truth of the heavy reality of America’s prejudice. His poems believed in change, but change for another day. In the words of Hughes himself, from his poem, “Prelude to Our Age”:

Thus I help to build democracy
For our nation.
Thus by decree across the history of our land—
The shadow of my hand:
_Negro_

All this
A prelude to our age:
Today.
Tomorrow
Is another
Page.