Langston Hughes & the Harlem Renaissance: Crash Course Literature 215

Crash Course: Literature
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=====Introduction (0:00)=====

Hi, I'm John Green, this is *Crash Course Literature*, and today we're going to discuss the poetry of Langston Hughes.

(0:05) So the Harlem Renaissance was an early 20th Century movement in which writers and artists of color explored what it means to be an artist, what it means to be black, and what it means to be an American, and also what it means to be all three of those things at the same time.

(0:18) MFTP: Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Does the Harlem Renaissance have anything to do with that renaissance with, like, Leonardo de Vinci, and all of the other... Ninja Turtles?

(0:24) Kind of, but the Harlem Renaissance happened a lot later than the European Renaissance, also on a different continent, and there was much less plague and much more jazz.

(Intro)

(0:42) OK, so one journalist described the Harlem Renaissance this way: "What a crowd! All classes and colors met face to face, ultra aristocrats, bourgeois, communists, Park Avenue galore, bookers, publishers, Broadway celebs, and Harlemites giving each other the once over."

(0:58) What's the once over? Is that a dirty thing, Stan? Apparently it is not a dirty thing.

(1:02) The Harlem Renaissance began just after the First World War and lasted into the early years of the Great Depression because it turns out it's pretty hard to have a renaissance when no one has any money, as they found out in Venice. And like the European Renaissance, it was a social and political movement, but also an artist one. I mean it inspired literature and poetry, music, drama, ethnography, publishing, dance, fashion, probably even some novelty cocktails. As Langston Hughes wrote about this time: "The negro was in vogue."

(1:29) Oh, it must be time for the open letter. Oh, look, it's a floating dictionary. An open letter to language. Hey there language, how's it going? Don't say it's going good, language; say it's going well.

(1:40) So Langston Hughes often used the term "*negro"* to refer to African Americans, and when we quote him or his poetry we're also going to use that term. But we won't use it when I'm talking about African Americans or the African American experience because these days we understand that term to be offensive. I would argue that this is a good thing about language; it has the opportunity to evolve and to become more inclusive.

(1:59) In short, language, I love you and I am amazed by you every day. Sorry if that sounds creepy; I feel I might start singing the song for *The Bodyguards,* so I'm just going to stop right now.

Best wishes,
John Green

(2:08) Right, so, the poems, essays, and novels of the Harlem Renaissance often discuss the so-called double consciousness of the African American experience, a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, and which you might remember from our *To Kill a Mockingbird* episode. Some writers like Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay used poetic forms historically associated with European white people, like the Shakespearean sonnet, the Petrarchan sonnet, and the villanelle, which is like a very fancy sonnet, but other writers, including Langston Hughes, chose forms based on African and African American folk forms, you know, fables and spirituals, children's rhymes, and blues songs.

(2:44) This is actually part of Modernism generally, as artists sought to mix high and low culture in an attempt to reinvent art. Like, see also Marcel Duchamp putting a toilet in an art gallery. I should clarify: there were already toilets in art galleries; he was putting it there as art.

=====Thought Bubble (2:58)=====

Anyway, let's go to the Thought Bubble for some background on Langston Hughes.

(3:00) Hughes was born in 1902 in Missouri to mixed-race parents, who divorced early. He grew up in Kansas and began to write poetry in high school: mostly because white students chose him as class poet. In his autobiography, he wrote: "Well, everyone knows -- except us -- that all Negros have rhythm, so they elected me class poet. I felt I couldn't let my white classmates down and I've been writing poetry ever since."

(3:23) Hughes' father wanted him to become a mining engineer so Hughes went to Columbia University, but he left after his freshman year, in part because other students have snubbed him, and in part because actually he didn't want to become a mining engineer.

(3:35) So he signed on to work on a boat, going more or less around the world, returning a couple of years later, this is true, with a red-haired monkey named Jocko. He didn't enjoy the trip very much but that might actually have been a good thing because as he wrote in his autobiography: "My best poems were all written when I felt the worst. When I was happy, I didn't write anything."

(3:53) Which stands in stark contrast to all the happy poets, you know: Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

(3:59) Hughes aimed to write in accessible, familiar language, and in that he was influenced by poets like Paul Laurence Dunbar, and also people like Carl Sandburg and Walt Whitman, all of whom wrote in vernacular, everyday language in the hopes that their work could appeal to a larger audience.

Thanks Thought Bubble.

=====Hughes' Approach to Poetry (4:15)=====

So, as Hughes wrote in a 1927 essay, classical forms didn't support the work he wanted to do: "Certainly the Shakespearean sonnet would be no mold in which to express the life of Beale Street or Lenox Avenue nor could the emotions of State Street be captured in rondeau. I am not interested in doing tricks with rhymes. I am interested in reproducing the human soul, if I can."

(4:38) And this is what makes Hughes such an important poet. He brilliantly combines formal poetry with the oral tradition, and he refuses to draw a bright line between fine art and folk art.

(4:49) OK, in order to have a better understanding of Hughes' approach to poetry, let's look at an early manifesto he wrote called "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." In this essay, he criticizes other black writers for being too interested in white culture and white forms. He writes: "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 American as possible."

(5:20) Now, some black writers, like Countee Cullen, accused Hughes of being TOO black. Like in a review of Hughes' first book Cullen wrote, "There is too much emphasis of strictly Negro themes." But, then again, later on, James Baldwin would condemn Hughes for not diving deep enough into African American experience; like Baldwin wrote that Hughes poems "take refuge, finally, in a fake simplicity in order to avoid the very difficult simplicity of the experience."

(5:45) It's hard out there for a Langston Hughes.

======"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (5:46)=====
Anyway, let's make up our own mind. I think the best way to get a sense of how Langston Hughes expresses himself is probably to, like, actually read a couple of his poems. Let's begin with "The Negro Speaks of Rivers":

"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 built 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."

(6:31) Here's a bit of news that will be discouraging to most of you aspiring writers out there: Hughes wrote that poem just after graduating from high school. He was riding a train to see his estranged father and he passed over the Mississippi. He writes: "I began to think about what that river, the old Mississippi, had meant to Negros in the past... Then I began to think about other rivers in the past--the Congo, and the Niger, and the Nile in Africa--and the thought came to me: 'I've known rivers,' and I put it down on the back of an envelope I had in my pocket, and within the space of ten or fifteen minutes, as the train gathered speed in the dusk, I had written this poem."

(7:07) Are you even serious? "Ten or fifteen minutes"! What? Really!

(7:10) So "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is in the lyric mode: it's poetry trying to capture an internal emotional state. He uses the vision of these rivers to transcend his immediate relationships and to connect himself instead to all of his African forefathers, trading the immediate for the immortal. The repetition of "I've known rivers" at the beginning and "my soul has grown deep like the rivers" at the middle and end, gives the poem the feeling of, like, a sermon or spiritual, in keeping with Hughes' use of folk forms.

(7:38) And then, there's the catalog of active verbs: "I bathed", "I built", "I listened", "I looked." Those show people actively participating in human life and having agency; that even amid oppression and dehumanization, these people were still building and listening and looking.

(7:53) And then, in the latter part of the poem, there are adjectives that in other poems might be used pejoratively, like "muddy" and "dusky", that are linked with other adjectives, "golden", "ancient", that encourage us to perceive them in a far more positive light. So, darkness and brownness are seen as lustrous and valuable and revered.

(8:12) And I know that some of you will say, oh, you're over-reading the poem: Hughes didn't mean any of this stuff. To which I say: it doesn't matter. These are still interesting and cool uses of language. Although, as it happens, I'm not over-reading it.

======"Harlem" (8:23)=====

Anyway, let's look at one more poem, "Harlem", written in 1951:

"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?"

(8:45) The dream here is likely a version of the American dream, a dream that at the time Hughes wrote the poem was still denied to most African Americans. And in that sense, it's kind of optimistic that Hughes uses the term *deferred*, rather than, like, *destroyed* or *forbidden*. There's also a great moment earlier in that same book of poems in which Hughes writes, "Good morning Daddy, ain't you heard, the boogie woogie rumble, of a dream deferred", which uses the conventions of blues music to associate the deferral of the dream with, like, a boogie-woogie rumble.

(9:11) But the imagery in this poem is very negative: it often takes things that are sweet and then makes them horrifying. You've got dried raisins, running sores. I guess sores aren't that sweet, but you do have crusty sweets. Even the verbs are negative: "dry", "fester", "stink", "crust", "sag". And that works against any real optimism. This is made even more interesting and complicated by the fact that the poem sounds like a nursery rhyme: it has neat, perfect, one-syllable rhymes like "sun" and "run", "meat" and "sweet". But then you have the layout of the poem, which resists conventional stanzas, and that troubles the simplicity here. Also, the rhythm of the poem is always changing. Like, this isn't straight iambic pentameter or anything like that, and that makes it hard to build into a comfortable pace as the reader. And then there's that last line, "Or does it explode", which from a meter perspective is totally fascinating because there's a stress on every single syllable: Or. Does. It. Ex-plode. I don't want to get too Lit Crit-y on you but it's like the last line itself is trying to explode because there's no break, no relief. So the rhymes make it sound harmless, like it's from a children's book, but the imagery and rhythm tell another, much more barbed story.

(10:20) And this is definitely one of Hughes' more political poems: He's warning that if circumstances don't change, there might be dangerous consequences. This poem proceeded the bulk of the Civil Rights Movement, but it suggests that withholding true equality has real risks and real costs to everyone in a social order.

=====Conclusion (10:36)=====

There's so many other great Langston Hughes poems that we don't

have time to discuss like: "Dream Boogie", "I, Too", "Dream Variations", "Theme for English B". I want to share just one more with you, no lit crit or anything, just the poem: "Folks I'm tell you, birthing is hard and dying is mean, so get yourself a little loving, in between." See, sometimes literature is just in the business of proving good advice.

Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

=====Credits (10:59)=====

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