Langston Hughes' "I, Too" and Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing"

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Literary Analysis of Poetry

Introduction

Langston Hughes' "I too" is a literary response to Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing." According to Whitman, he is able to hear the 'varied carols' and the 'singing' of the ordinary people of America. Meanwhile, Langston Hughes, born ten years after the death of Whitman, raises his voice, as if Whitman missed this exclusive voice when he wrote his poem "I Hear America Singing." Both poems were written about America, yet the approaches are distinct, which leads to two different voices. Both poems are about the hearing of voices; in Whitman, the voices are heard, while in Hughes, the voice is raised so that one can hear and respond to the suppressed voices of the black community in America to question American identity. In the course of this comparative essay, the intention is to bring forth the central themes of the poems as well as the form and the devices used to compose the message.

Comparative Analysis

Hughes' poem deals with the personal experience, while Whitman's poem is based on common day-to-day experience. For instance, in Whitman's "I Hear America Singing," the poet hears the voices of the people, ordinary people of America, such as "the boatman," "the wood-cutter," "the shoe-maker," and even the women (Hollander, 2004). And according to Whitman, "each singing" is unique and belongs only to the people, an ideal depiction of America in all its beauty captured in the form of a song. On the contrary, "I too" or "I too, sing America," a direct allusion to Whitman's poem, suggests something horrible and racist about the ideal representation of American people. On the contrary, Hughes' poem is about personal experience; he experienced this humiliation of exclusion, and "I, too, am America" suggests his right to be American. Langston Hughes feels like he's abandoned by the great poet. Hence, he raises his own voice that "I, too, sing America," "I too, am America," and "I am the darker brother".

For Hughes, Whitman's celebration of day-to-day life of ordinary people does not recognize his voice (Phillips, 1994). Therefore, he needs to raise his own voice and sing, not Whitman's "varied carols"

but a cry about segregation and marginalization of Afro-Americans. Hughes's poem is a wake-up call that "I too am" American, and I too share this culture. Whitman hears America singing "the melodious songs" of joy and happiness while Hughes sings the song of humiliation and disappointment that he faces from his fellow white brothers. Thus, Whitman hears, and Hughes sings; one hears the melodies, and the other sings the grating as well as the possibility of a better future. Despite this humiliation, the speaker laughs and eats and is getting strong.

If Hughes' poem is about the social divide, Whitman's poem depicts the daily routine of the working class and sees it with joy and happiness as they are "singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs." Whitman's poem does not see any pain in the labor but only joy and embracement of this labor; the poet omits the elite class. There is no single reference to the upper class in the poem (Smith, 2000). He insists on the metaphor of singing in almost every line of the poem, "the shoe-maker singing", "the mason singing," and so on. Unlike Whitman, Hughes's poem is filled with acrimony and hostility; lines like "but I laugh, and eat well, and grow strong" depict his frustration rather than happiness. The use of language is also evidence of this impending difference in themes as well as form. For example, Whitman uses elevated language with words like "varied carols," "blithe and strong", "robust and friendly," and so on. The purpose of using this kind of language is to inspire the celebration of the beauty of life while, on the contrary, Hughes' use of language is colloquial and minimalistic without any single high-frequency words (Westover, 2002).

Both poems are written in free verse; the poems do not follow rhyme, rhythm, and meter, yet the treatment of both poets is very different. For example, Whitman is known to be the pioneer of free verse, a poetic form that does not follow the conventional rules of rhyme, rhythm, and meter. Nevertheless, the verses have rhyme and meter as the rhythm is maintained through repetition and alliteration. Whitman's poem does not follow any rhyming scheme, but the repetition is there, and the rhythm is achieved in individual verses as the following verse suggests:

"The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing." The freedom of Whitman's poetic form celebrates the democratic nature of his ideas about the people of America. His poetic form is highly compatible with his themes of individual liberty and freedom. Similarly, Hughes' poem follows the same poetic style, the free verse. Hughes was very famous for the musicality of his verse. The poem "I, too" does not follow any rhyming or metrical scheme, yet the rhythm is achieved through the irregular stops (Davidas, 2001). "I, Too, Sing America": Jazz and Blues Techniques and Effects in Some of Langston Hughes's Selected Poems." *Dialectical anthropology* 26.3-4 (2001): 267-272. The rhythm is realized when read out loud. Unlike Whitman's lengthy lines, some lines only consist of a single word. Furthermore, the use of metaphors in both poems participates in the making of their themes. For example, the central metaphor in Whitman's poem is "singing"; for Whitman's workers, labor is a kind of song, a beautiful melodious song. The labor involves physical activities, and Whitman is also known as the poet of the body; it is one of the central themes in the "Song of Myself." On the other hand, the kitchen table is used as a metaphor to capture the idea of communion, love, and brotherhood. When the darker brother is denied this table, he is denied love, communion, and compassion. In other words, he is isolated and marginalized. The

kitchen represents this exclusion and rejection.

Whitman's poem is perspectival, while Hughes' poem focuses on one issue of American identity. Many events are happening in the "I Hear America Singing" that involve the whole community, including women and children. On the other hand, Hughes' poem is concerned with the issue of segregation and racism. Whitman sees this broad canvas of possibilities to make America great through labor, while Hughes demands equality and equal rights as he is also part of this culture and shares the same identity as an American.

Conclusion

"I Hear America Singing" and "I, too, am American" share many similarities as well as differences regarding form and themes, as we have seen in the above paragraphs. There is a literary oedipal conflict between Whitman and Hughes, as we have seen that Hughes challenged his literary father to spot a gap that Whitman didn't fill. Yet I believe that both poems are about the marginalized and the ordinary. Whitman celebrates the life of the common people of America, and he sees them as America while Hughes, too, wants to become part of Whitman's America, the great America that values liberty, life, and pursuit of happiness for everyone.

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