

## The American Dream in Langston Hughes' Selected Poems

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**Résumé:** Pendant longtemps, le rêve américain a inspiré la communauté Africaine Américaine. Cette notion est présente dans la littérature Africaine Américaine comme dans la pièce de théâtre *The Raisin in the Sun* de Lorraine Hansberry et dans des poèmes comme ceux de Langston Hughes. En nous servant des outils du post-colonialisme et de la stylistique, nous analyserons dans un corpus de poèmes écrits par Langston Hughes la lutte de la communauté Africaine Américaine pour réalisation du rêve américain.

**Mots-clés :** rêve américain, communauté afro-américaine, marginalisation, post-colonialisme.

**Abstract:** For long time, the American dream has inspired the African-American community. This motif is present in the African American literature such as Lorraine Hansberry's *The Raisin in the Sun* as well as in many poems written by Langston Hughes. Using the tools provided by post-colonialism and stylistics, we will analyze in a corpus of poems written by Langston Hughes the African American's struggle for the achievement of the American Dream.

**Keywords:** American Dream, African American community, marginalization, post-colonialism.

### Introduction

Post-colonialism criticism has emerged as a distinct category with the development of technology, transportation system and globalization. The tendency is to gather together political, social and economic entities and unite people. Nevertheless, racism, ethnocentrism seem to be some hindrances on the way. Even the United States has faced such hindrances. We have been told about racial violence directed very often against the African American community. Langston Hughes, an African American poet born, in February 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, to James Nathanael and Canie Mercer Langston Hughes also experienced the harsh reality of racism and hatred at an early age. (Emanuel, 1). When the time came for him to attend school, he was forced to attend a school across town because he was "black". Langston Hughes' struggle as an African American has shaped the kind of writer and leader of the African American community he has become. How has Langston Hughes expressed his dream for better condition of life in poetry? How can the notion of American Dream be deciphered in his poems? We will try to answer those questions by using tools provided by post-colonialism and stylistics in order to analyze in a corpus of poems written by Langston Hughes, the African American community's plight, the impact that American Dream failure had on them and their struggle for the achievement of the American Dream.

## I/The African Community Plight

In “Blue Bayou”, “Water-front Streets”, Langston Hughes calls to mind how African Americans start experiencing violence during slavery period. “Water-front Streets” reads:

The spring is not so beautiful there  
But ships sail away  
To where the spring is wondrous rate  
and life is gray. (Hughes, 52).

The structural form of “Water-front Streets” alternates a nanometer with a pentameter. The metaphor “The spring is not so beautiful there” highlights the fact that under slavery there was not good days for African American slaves. Even the spring, which is a beautiful weather was for them a time for sorrow, cry and they could not enjoy it. This feeling of sadness is stressed in the pun “and life is gray”. The allusion “But ships sail away” refers to the numerous ships that used to transport African Americans from Africa to the American continent after kidnapping them.

The title of the poem “Blue Bayou” suggests that the African American were treated just like animals for a bayou is also a place where animals rest. It reads:

White man  
makes me work all day  
And I work too hard  
Then a white man  
Takes my woman away. (Hughes, 170).

In “Blue Bayou”, Langston Hughes is speaking at the first pronoun “I “ to express is empathy for all the victims of the sharecropper unjust system. Through this system, the white American, the colonizer, American Americans were relegated to subsidiary and marginalized. According to Jeremy Rifkin, under the sharecropper system, the money that was paid to Africa Americans was so little that he was obliged to borrow food items from the plantation domain shop owned by the White American. (Jeremy, 106). The hyperbole “White man/makes me work all day” stresses the fact that African American slaves work for long period of time under rain, and sun without rest and was fed with little food they could only buy on credit. The white master didn’t only the African American’s slave time, energy, money, but also his wife. “Then a white man/ Takes my woman away” is an euphemism that refers to the shameful fact of sexual abuse of slaves’ wife by the white master.

In “A black Pierrot”, “Merry-Go-Round”, “Freedom”, “Train”, “Puzzled”, “Elevator Boy”, “The Blues” Langston Hughes describes how long time after the end of slavery, African Americans find it difficult to make a living because of the unjust economic system that favors more White Americans than African American people. The “Blues” reads:

When the shoe strings break  
On both your shoes

And you're in hurry-  
That's the blues  
When you go to buy a candy bar  
And you've lost the dime you had-  
Slipped through a hole in your pocket  
That's the blues, too, and bad! (Hughes, 171).

In this poem, "That's the blues" is a pun that makes a parallelism between the sad tone of the blues and the sad and miserable life of the African Americans. The African American's life is compared to the rhythm of the blues that is played on. In the hyperbole "When you go to buy a candy bar/And you've lost the dime you had" suggests that the salary made by African American is so low that it can only buy a candy bar. This image highlights how difficult it is for African American people to buy nutritious food. "Puzzled" contrasts the miserable economic situation of African Americans living in Harlem with the one of rich businessmen selling there:

Sure, we remember  
Now, when the man at the corner store  
Says sugar's gone up another two cents  
And bread one,  
And there's a new tax on cigarettes  
We remember the job we never had,  
Never could get,  
And can't have now  
Because we're colored  
So we stand here  
On the edge of hell  
In Harlem  
And look out of the world. (Alfred, 191)

The expression "Now, when the man at the corner store" is the symbol of the rich bourgeoisie who decides of staples price in the market and set the rules and regulations of the market. The repetition of "we remember" suggests that everywhere in the society things are set in order to provide to the African Americans the constant reminder that they are poor, miserable people made to live at the periphery of the society. In the hyperbole "On the edge of hell", the image of the hell is used to highlight the intensity of the suffering experienced by the marginalized African Americans. The African Americans are described as living on the "The edge", while the white Americans are part of the "world", the living world where they enjoy human life to the full. African Americans are kept in areas where houses are in pitiful a condition and uncomfortable. In "Madam and the Rent Man", the speaker is complaining about this situation:

The sink is broke,  
The water don't run,  
And you ain't done a thing,  
You promised to've done (Alfred, 204).

Here, the speaker is voicing his disappointment resulting from the difficulty to have free access to running water. In the apostrophe "And you ain't done a thing", the speaker is

just denouncing the fact the landlord has ignore his warnings about troubleshootings in the plumbing system. In “Ballad of the Landlord”, the tone is more provocative. The speaker is urging his landlord to make the needed repaired in the house that he is renting:

Landlord, landlord,  
 My roof has sprung a leak  
 Don't you 'member I told you about it  
 Way last week? (National Humanities, web)

In the apostrophe “Landlord”, Langston Hughes addresses rich Jewish or White American Landlords who do not care about the comfort of the African American tenants. The speaker observes that it has been a long time that his roof is linking and that his landlord has refused to hear his complain. The rhetoric thought-provoking person is to force the landlord to come out of his torpor. It is a cry of protest and an incentive to make landlords react by showing concern about the situation of their African American tenant.

In fact, many African Americans cannot live in a decent house because jobs offered to them are scarce and not well-paid. In “Elevation Boy”, the poet addresses that issue:

Jobs are just chances  
 Like everything else  
 Maybe a little luck now,  
 Maybe not.  
 Maybe a good job sometimes (Hughes, 195).

Here, in the metaphor “Jobs are just chances”, good jobs are compared to phenomena that just happen to people without any logic, unexpectedly. This idea is stressed by the anaphora “Maybe” in the last three verses. The good jobs are so scarce and uncertain that the African Americans who occupy them are pictured as lucky in the verse “Maybe a little luck now”. This situation disturbs Langston Hughes so much that he tells to an audience at Monterey Peninsula College in 1958 that he has the feeling that “Negro emancipation was not progressing well” and it is what impels him to decry economic discrimination by writing “Elevation Boy” (Emmanuel, 69). Consequently, it is concerned by the pervasiveness of economic prejudice experienced by the African American community that, in “Elevator Boy”, Langston Hughes comments at least twice as often on economic abuse as in any other poem.

In “Border Line”, “Ennui” and “Wake”, Langston Hughes keeps his finger on the African Americans’ pulse and goes further by describing in detail how the African American community feels about the economic discrimination made to them. “Ennui”, one of the shortest of his poems reads:

It's such a  
 Bone  
 Being always  
 Poor. (Alfred, 80).

The poem is made of four verses: a trimeter, a monometer, a dimeter and a monometer again. The alliteration in “b” mimics the beating of the African American’s heart, stressed by the anxiety of life caused by the dire poverty. The poverty of the African Community is compared to a bone in the second verse in order to suggest that it has become a part of them and stress how difficult is it for them to part away with. Langston Hughes here takes post-colonialist stand by taking side with the African American community and protesting against White American oppression. Post-colonialism critics deal sometimes with nationalistic rebellion against the imperialist domination and Marxism unrelenting critiques of capitalism and colonialism. For Gyan Prakash: “When Marxists turned the spotlight on colonial explorations, their criticism was framed by a historicist scheme that universalized Europe’s historical experience. The emergent post-colonial critique, by contrast seeks to undo the Eurocentricism produced by the institution of the Western’s trajectory, its appropriation of the other as History.” (Gyan, 1475). A post-colonialist approach then goes beyond the Eurocentricism promoted by White American and put into question all the eurocentrist norms including cultural ones. In “Border line”, Langston Hughes advocates for the change of norms imposed by the white dominant group:

I used to wonder  
I think the difference lies  
Between tears and crying  
I used to wonder  
About here and there  
I think the distance  
Is Nowhere. (Alfred, 81).

In this poem, Langston Hughes is putting into question the artificial racial barriers put by White Americans between them and African Americans. In the refrain “I used to wonder” he expresses how he is puzzled by the Western social norms. The first pronoun “I” is an anaphora that refers to each African American. Langston Hughes acts as their spokesman. The assonance in “i” in “living, dying, I, lies, crying” mimics the pains that these artificial racists borders have brought to the African community. Through a series of paradoxes such as “lying and dying”, “tears and crying”, “here and there”, “I think the distance/Is Nowhere”, Langston Hughes is making fun of the social, economic and political barriers which has divided White Americans and African Americans. The poem “Border line” is initially composed in December 1937, in a French village of Tour de Carol, just across the border from war-embattled Spain as Hughes is sitting in a station buffet and ponders over what a difference a border makes, on one side of an invisible line and on the other side none. On one side peace and on the other side war. (Alfred, 127). Langston Hughes then uses the analogy or imagery of a border in order to refer to the invisible borders or the racist social norms that have separated White Americans from the African Americans. Langston Hughes then looks like a nonracial poet, a poet beyond color, a kind of universal poet who tries to reconcile or bring together white and African Americans as citizens of the same country. Steven Tracy admits:

A fitting coincidence attaches to the proportions of these two  
broad categories in Hughes’ poems whereas every tenth person

in America has been said to be the Negro, roughly every tenth poems by Hughes has no reference to color (...)The author's nonracial poetic themes number no more than twenty, and brief to several indicate the quality of his efforts. (Steven, 127-128)

In the "Troubled Woman", "Strange Hurt", Langston Hughes focuses specifically on the African women's plight. "Troubled Woman" reads:

She stands  
 In the quiet darkness  
 This troubled woman  
 Bowed by  
 Weariness and pain  
 Like an  
 Autumn flower  
 In the frozen rain  
 Like a  
 Wind blows autumn flower  
 Again. (Hughes, 77).

In "Troubled Woman", Langston Hughes is making an apologue of the African American Woman. In the simile "Like an/Autumn flower", he exalts her beauty, her delicacy. He also denounces the mistreatments that African American women experience from men. "In the quiet darkness", "Wind-blows" and "In the frozen rain" are hard time conditions referring to all mistreatments experienced by African American women. The euphemism "That never lifts its head" pictures their shameful death resulting from domestic violence. In "Strange Hurt", Langston Hughes recalls the African American women who were forced to work during slavery under rain:

In times of stormy weather  
 She felt quer pain  
 That said  
 You'll find rain better  
 Than shelter from the rain. (Hughes,84).

The slave woman is forced to work under rain and sexually abused in all indifference without any possibility to denounce it publicly. Nevertheless, in "She felt quer pain/That said/You'll find rain better", the pain inflicted to the African American slave woman is personified, given a voice in, order to express and stress the cruelty of the master's treatment. The pain experienced by In "Me and the Mule", Langston Hughes uses a feminine voice in order to denounce the mistreatment African American women experience:

I'm like that old mule  
 Black- and don't give a damn!  
 You got to take me  
 Like I am. (Alfred, 125)

In the metaphoric expression “I’m like that old mule”, the woman speaking at the first person in the poem makes fun of the patriarchal ideology which has blinded men and made them believe that women are just like a mule, an animal made to work for men only. The motif of the mule is also present in *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life*, a three act play co-written by Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. It makes the satire of men and of the patriarchal ideology (Hughes and Hurston, Preface). In this act play, African American Women are pictured as a specific group who suffer some mistreatments because of their double-identity: the one of the woman and the African one. In “Me and the Mule”, Langston Hughes reuses this folkloric image of the “mule of the world” to highlight the fact that African American women carry too much burdens just like a mule does because they have been handed the burdens that both men in general and specifically the White Americans refuse to carry. (Elizabeth, 24) Langston Hughes shows a keen understanding of women’s oppression and expresses a kind of feminist engagement. Such engagement is renewed in 50-50:

I ain’t got no man  
 Big boy opened his mouth and said  
 Trouble with you is  
 You ain’t got no head  
 If you had a head and used your mind  
 You could have me with you  
 All the time  
 She answered, Babe, what must I do?  
 He said, share your bed-  
 And your money, too. (Alfred, 101)

The use of pronouns such as “You”, “Me”, “She”, “He” indicates that different characters are present in the poem, just like in a dialogue. It is a dialogue between a man and his beloved woman. The woman rid of any complex of inferiority put into question her husband’s headships, in the irony: “I ain’t got no man” and in the pun “You ain’t got no head” because she dislikes the way he is treating her. Using insulting words such as the metaphor “Trouble with you is”, he humiliates her and makes her feel like a troublemaker, the cause of all his problems. The woman also expresses her dislike about the fact that her man views her only as a sexual object in the euphemism “He said, share your bed”. In this euphemism, the bed stands as the symbol of intimate sexual relationships between married man and woman. Moreover, she also makes the satire of her husband’s laziness in the enjambed verse “and your money, too.”. She reproaches to her husband the fact that he receives more money from her than he gives because of his laziness. The theme of the poem “50-50” suggests that a woman is not man’s slave but a complement, made from the man’s flesh. It is an allusion to the creation Bible account according to which woman is made with one rib from the man. (Watchtower, 45).

In “50-50”, the woman pictured is expecting something better from her marriage. Her dreams have been deferred. In fact, no matter their gender, African Americans face various



kinds of injustices. Faced to injustices of various kinds, how do they envision the American Dream? Have they succeeded in achieving it? Has the dream deferred?

## II/The American Dream Deferred

The phrase American Dream was coined in 1931 by the historian James Truslow Adams. He defines it as “a society both open and dynamic, grounded in a commitment to individual opportunity and to better life for each generation”. (Gari, 59). Langston Hughes’ use of dream as “ductile to young poet as love, his spiritual progression through sentiments, treason, strong faith and social criticism is traceable.” (Alfred, 129). Langston Hughes is not urged to talk about dream in a romantic way in his poems. His use of this motif is connected with realism, the condition of the African American community, his hope for a social change, the failure of the American Dream since for many the African Americans, the American Dream has deferred. Sometimes, the dream deferred has something to do with lack of freedom or the dire poverty referred to in “Let America be America Again”:

Who said the free? Not me?  
 Surely not me? The millions on relief today?  
 The millions shot down when we strike?  
 The millions who have nothing for our pay?  
 For all the dreams we’ve dreamed  
 And all the songs we’ve sung  
 And all the hopes we’ve held  
 And all the flags we’ve hung.  
 The millions who have nothing for our pay  
 Except the dream that’s almost dead today. (Hughes, 12)

The whole poem contains 18 stanzas. The four first verses of the excerpt are rhetoric questions not commonly used in poetry. In “Who said the free? Not me?”, Langston Hughes is addressing with irony, the White people who promise to bring civilization and freedom to the African Americans but who end up enslaving them, deriding their lack of consistency. As a matter of fact, rhetoric questions are a feature of Langston Hughes’ poetry. He belongs to the New guard group of poets who have spearheaded the Harlem renaissance by reviewing well-accepted “white-middle class, European standards” such as the absence of rhetoric questions in poetry. (Steven, 17-18). These rhetoric questions have a sarcastic tone intended to make fun of an American dream that has failed to bring to African American people the true freedom they are longing for. Using the anaphora “And all”, Langston Hughes lists all what the African American community has been able to do, out of the inspiration they have got from the American Dream. Finally, in the oxymoron “Except the dream that’s almost dead today”, Langston Hughes denounces the fact that many African Americans have died without being able to achieve the American Dream they have so longed for. The motif of the American Dream deferred is also present in “Harlem”:

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 a rotten meat?  
 or crust and sugar over  
 like a syrup sweat?  
 May be it just sags  
 like a heavy load  
 or does it explode? (Hughes, 12)

In “Harlem”, through a series of similes Langston Hughes compares the American Dream deferred to a raisin drying in the sun (3<sup>rd</sup> verse), to a festered sore (4<sup>th</sup> verse), to a rotten meat (6<sup>th</sup> verse), to a syrup sweat (8<sup>th</sup> verse) and to a heavy load (10<sup>th</sup> line). All these imageries carry the idea of decay through sensory images in order to give to the reader the feeling that he can see, hear, smell and even experience to some extent the African American’s feeling of disappointment as a result of a deferred dream. In some poems such as “Ruby Brown”, Langston Hughes evokes the effects that the American dream failure has on some women:

She was young and beautiful  
 And golden like the sunshine  
 That warmed her body  
 And because she was colored  
 Mayville had no place to offer her,  
 Nor fuel for the clean flame of joy  
 That tried to burn within her soul. (Hughes, 166)

In the first stanza of the poem “Ruby Brown”, the African Woman beauty is exalted in the metaphoric expression “And golden like the sunshine”. She is given some divine attribute, like the deity sun in order to highlight the fact that she is beautiful creature made by God. Nevertheless, in the hyperbole “Mayville had no place to offer her”, Langston Hughes denounces the fact that, as the result of the American Dream failure, the African American woman is marginalized. In the metaphor “Nor fuel for the clean flame of joy/That tried to burn within her soul.”, the American Dream is compared to a lamp in the night, light being associated with hope. Unfortunately, the light of that lamp has grown dim because of lack of fuel associated with the American Dream deferred. In the Second stanza of “Ruby Brown”, Langston Hughes makes the African American woman express her feelings:

One day,  
 Sitting on old Mrs. Latham’s back porch  
 Polishing the silver,  
 She asked herself two questions  
 And they ran something like this:  
 What can a color girl do  
 On the money from a white woman’s kitchen?

And ain't there any joy in this town? (Hughes, 166)

In the second stanza of “Ruby Brown”, the African American woman is so troubled by the American Dream deferred that sitting at the back of her mistress’ porch she asks: “What can a color girl do/On the money from a white woman’s kitchen?/And ain’t there any joy in this town?” These rhetoric questions highlight the disappointment, the despair of that woman, as she realizes that being a servant girl of a white American woman she will be condemned to live a miserable life. In the Fourth stanza and last stanza, the African American woman has decided to live her white American mistress and to become a prostitute, lying down with many White American men in order to earn much more money:

But the white men,  
 Habituéés of the white shuttered houses,  
 Pay more money to her now  
 Than they ever did before,  
 When she worked in their kitchen. (Hughes, 166)

The euphemism “Habituéés of the white shuttered houses”, makes reference to the house of prostitution in order to highlight how shameful is the act of prostitution. Here Langston Hughes denounces an unjust and sexist system which makes African American women hope or dream of better days and at the same time is unable to help them achieve their dreams.

The motif of the American Dream deferred is also present in one of Langston Hughes’ longest poem “Freedom Train”. That poem is made of 15 stanzas and some of them have 31 verses. The poem makes an overview of the African American community history, since the slavery period to nowadays and highlights how their dream for freedom has eluded them:

Down South in Dixie only train I see’s  
 Got a Jim Crow car set aside from me.  
 I hope there ain’t no Jim Crow as the Freedom Train  
 No back door entrance to the Freedom Train,  
 No signs FOR COLOURED on the Freedom Train.  
 NO WHITE FOLKS ONLY in the Freedom Train (Alfred, 277) .

The word “Train” in the verses “Down South in Dixie only train I see” and “the Freedom Train” is metaphor as well as a pun. Freedom is compared to a train that can carry the speaker away from the trouble away. He is dreaming of taking the train of true freedom, as a way of escaping his “oppressive conditions and problems”. (Steven, 206-207). Nevertheless, the speaker’s dream of freedom is deferred for he denounces the fact he is victim of segregation, exclusion, marginalization in the irony that sounds as a protest he shouts his disappointment: “No back door entrance to the Freedom Train/No signs FOR COLOURED on the Freedom Train./NO WHITE FOLKS ONLY in the Freedom Train”. The speaker is revolted by segregation and makes fun of the motto “Separated but Equal” enforced

everywhere including in public transportation such as train. For the speaker, it looks like a paradox that African Americans can be considered as equal as White Americans and at the same time, not be able to enjoy the same rights and freedom like the former. Consequently, the speaker is disappointed.

In “Will V-Day Be Me –Day too?”, Langston Hughes is picturing the disappointment of the African American’s soldiers. Before going to fight for America, many dreamed about receiving all the honors and recognition when coming back. The poem is like an open letter written by an African American soldier who has fought Germans and the japs and other fascists in war. The poem is written around wartime. After mentioning the horrors he has seen and his battle for survival, he adds:

So this is what I want to know  
 When we see Victory’s glow  
 Will you still let old Jim Crow  
 Hold me back?  
 When all those foreign folks who’ve waited-  
 Italians, Chinese, Danes-are liberated  
 Will I still be ill-fated  
 Because I’m black? (World’s Poetry, 60-61)

The rhetoric questions “Will you still let old Jim Crow/Hold me back? and “Will I still be ill-fated/Because I’m black?” evoke with realism and pathos the doubts and the sadness of the African American soldier about his future. He is sad because he notices that American White soldiers who have fought with him for the same cause are not treated the same way as him. Victims of marginalization because of his race and wondering about his future, he asks the question: “When we see victory’s glow/Will you still let old Jim Crow/Hold me back?”. The assonance in “o” in the words “So”, “know”, “glow”, “old Jim Crow”, “hold”, “those” “foreign folks”, “who” mimic the surprise, the astonishment of the African American as he notices upon returning back to America that the fascists who he has killed or made prisoners are freer than him living in sordid and prisonlike economic situations. The mistreatments and arbitrary violence made to African Americans are also motifs present in some of Langston Hughes’ poems such as “Silhouette”. In “Silhouette”, Langston Hughes tells the story of a man killed by a white man who has taken his wife away.

They’ve hung a black man  
 To a roadside tree  
 In the dark of the moon  
 For the world to see,  
 How Dixie protects  
 It’s white womanhood. (Alfred, 171)

The oxymoron “In the dark of the moon” describes the how the weather is liked when the African American man is lynched. It is night. The strange weather adds to the strange nature of the violence made to the man lynched and hanged by the roadside. In the irony “How Dixie protects/It’s white womanhood”, Langston Hughes makes fun of inability of

American government to protect all the citizens from arbitrary violence as well as their lack of respect for the African American Women's rights to choose her mate.

But does Langston Hughes view the African Community's plight as a fatality? Otherwise, what does he encourage his fellowmen to do? Do African Americans have to struggle for a change or must be pessimistic?

### III/The Struggle for the American Dream Achievement

The American Dream has sustained African Americans from slavery on and also thereafter, instilling into them the motivation to achieve a better life for each generation. In "freedom Plover", we read:

When a man starts out with nothing,  
When a man starts out with hands,  
Empty, but clean,  
When a man starts to build a world,  
He starts first with himself  
And the faith, that is in his heart-  
The struggle there,  
The will there to build.  
First in the heart is the dream,  
There the mind starts seeking a way. (Hughes, 17)

The anaphora "When a man starts out" points repeatedly to the fact that every human's endeavor starts with a dream. The power of dreaming sustains the man and can help him to persevere until the realization of his ambition. The hyperbolic expression "When a man starts to build a world", stresses the fact that with dreams, men can accomplish tremendous and amazing things. Making reference to the slavery era, Langston Hughes observes that apart from the heavy workload that they have been forced to carry, African Americans have also carried "a mental image not in the hands or on the backs", "but in their hearts". (John, 107): The American Dream. The African Americans' dreams of freedom have sustained them as they were enduring humiliations, mistreatments from the White American master.

The American Dream brings solace to the grieving hearts of African Americans. The White American could take everything they possess including their life, but could not prevent African Americans from dreaming as long as they were alive. Making reference to the power of dreams, Langston Hughes writes in the "Dreams":

Hold Fast to dreams  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken-winged bud  
That cannot fly  
Hold fast to dreams  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field.  
Frozen with snow. (Hughes, 108).

Here, the dreams are personified. In “For if dreams die” and in “For when dreams go”, dreams are compared to human beings who can die and walk away. Dreams are pictured in this way in order to stress the fact without the ability to dream, African Americans will not have survived. Dreams are pictured as the essence of life, the ones providing the motivation to continue to live. Consequently, in the anaphora “Hold Fast to dreams”, Langston Hughes urges the African American community to stick to their dreams, to the American Dream and to struggle in order to achieve it.

“Ballad of the landlord” and “Madam and the rent” are satires of the white American economic system that favors more white American people and makes difficult for African American people to find decent homes. In “Ballad of the landlord”, Langston Hughes putting himself in the shoe of An African American man living in a ghetto speaks to all the rich landlords:

What? You gonna get eviction orders?  
 You gonna cut of my heat?  
 You gonna take my furniture and  
 Throw it in the street?  
 Um-huh! You talking high and mighty.  
 Talk on-till you get through.  
 You ain’t gonna be able to say a word.  
 If I land my fists on you. (National Humanities,55).

The series rhetoric questions “What? You gonna get eviction orders?”, “You gonna cut of my heat?”, “Throw it in the street?” are addressed to rich landlords in order to provoke them and make them realize how cruel they are used to treat African Americans who rent their house. The anaphora “You gonna” suggests the fact that rich landlords have been acting that way for such a long time as if it is a fatality. The sarcasm “Throw it in the street?” makes fun of the arrogant way landlords treat and abuse their tenants as well as their lack of humanity. John Hope franklin explains that “the exploitation by white landlords of the newly awed black was made easier since the latter have little choice in selecting places of residence (...) Blocks containing a majority of white people were to be designated as white blocks” (Franklin, 231). In a synecdoche, “If I land my fists on you”?, the tenant expresses his feeling of revolt and his desire to use even violence to make his human rights be respected. In “Ballad of the landlord” Langston’s Hughes, as the professional blue singers mixes blues with storytelling. Steven Tracy observes:

The bulk of Hughes’s poems with women speakers are concerned with love- lost loves, mistreatment, revenge for mistreatment, separation by death (...) Hughes’s blues poems were written, as may be expected as thematic blues. That is why they “maintain a single coherent theme through the song”, or tell a story in the manner of many recorded-professional blue singers, as opposed to the often, loosely associative, disconnected or even contradicting texts, sometimes collected from many folk-blues artists. (Tracy, 183-184)

Steven Tracy focuses on the aesthetic reasons why Langston Hughes let African American characters mainly speak in his poems. She highlights that it gives coherence, a beauty and originality to the text. Moreover, by letting African American people from various walks of life and gender speak, Langston Hughes looks like someone connected to the African American community, a spokesman and a defender of the whole African American community.

The themes of oppression and violence made to African Americans are also present in “Genius Child”, “Reverie on the Harlem River”, “Not a Movie”. In the latter one, Langston Hughes recalls:

Well, they rocked him with road apples  
Because he tried to vote  
and whipped his head with clubs  
and he crawled on his knees to his home  
and he got the midnight train  
and he crossed Dixie line  
now he’s livin’  
on a 133<sup>rd</sup>. (Hughes, 239).

In this poem “he” refers to all African American men, victims of White Americans’ brutality and violence because they struggle for their right to vote. In the metaphor “and he crawled on his knees to his home”, Langston Hughes suggests that such brutality is inhuman, transforming humans into beasts. The anaphora “and” is used to tell the series of violent acts occurring one after another and highlights the fact that too much violence has remained unpunished. Here Langston Hughes uses a journalistic and epic style mixed with poetry in order to praise the courage of African American men.

The struggle of African Americans is not only social, political or economic but also cultural. Langston Hughes and some African American writers of the same generation have made a meaningful contribution to the mainstream of American culture by leading a cultural fight in their literary production for the rehabilitation of the African American culture. Langston Hughes has fallen in love with the African American music when he was only nine years-old. (Emmanuel, 137) .It seems that Langston Hughes’ relationships with African American music and particularly the blues is very intimate. James Emmanuel notices that he even uses blues as a source of inspiration to write poetry.

In “My People”, “Black is Beautiful”, “Afro-American fragments”, “Negro: Black is Beautiful”, Langston Hughes encourages the African Americans to get rid of any complex of inferiority and booster their ego. He subverts the cultural “eurocentric norms and practices which has relegated to subsidiary or marginalized roles” the African Americans’ ones. In “Spiritual: Black and Music” and “ Note of Commercial theatre”, Langston Hughes show an engagement in a kind of cultural resistance, reclaiming his past and the past of the African American community stolen or discarded by the white Americans. The “Note of Commercial theatre”, reads:

You've taken my blues and gone.  
 You sing 'em on Broadway  
 And you sing 'em in Hollywood  
 And you mixed 'em up with symphonies  
 And you fixed 'em  
 So that they don't sound like me  
 Yep, you done taken my blues and games. (Hughes, 190).

In the apostrophe “You’ve taken my blues and gone”, American white people are compared to stealers, accused of plagiarism for having copied the music originally invented by African Americans such the blues. Broadway”, “Hollywood” are allusions to famous places where the African American music is eroded, devaluated, mixed with symphonies taken from the White culture. That hybrid music has served more the interests of White American people since it has been used to establish their hegemony. The mixture of Standard English with the African vernacular in the series “You sing ‘em on Broadway/ And you sing ‘em in Hollywood/And you mixed ‘em up with symphonies/And you fixed ‘em” is intended to put into question the white people cultural hegemony. In the simile “So that they don’t sound like me” Langston Hughes refuses to identify himself with the kind of music produced by white Americans under the label blues. He also suggests that there is something, deep, spiritual that makes the connection between African Americans and their music, making them be part of it. About Langston Hughes’s passion for African American music, James Emmanuel notices:

Confident that full expression of the Negro soul-world will be a precious addition to the mainstream of America and world culture- Hughes has often employed novel and experimental forms to achieve it (...). In Kansas city, at the age of nine, on Independence Avenue and on Twelfth Street, Hughes was first impressed- outside family circles- by the sound of the Negro soul: He heard the blues, his first inspiration to write poetry. (Emmanuel, 137).

James Emmanuel notices that he uses it as a source of inspiration to write poetry. In “Graduation”, “Theme for English B”, “Mother to Son” and “Negro Mother”, Langston Hughes highlights the fact that education is important for the economic independence and true Emancipation of African Americans. In “Graduation”, there is like a prayer made to God, asking him to allow every African American to be educated and rise socially:

The DIPLOMA burst its frame  
 To scatter star-dust in the their eyes  
 Mama says, Praise Jesus!  
 The color race will rise! (Hughes, 137)

In the verses “The DIPLOMA burst its frame/To scatter star-dust in the their eyes”, a diploma obtained by an African American is personified, being given the magical power of



hypnotizing White Americans, making them change suddenly their attitude towards the graduated African American. Diploma appears as a mark of nobility, respectability and honorability. Since, it is difficult for African Americans to go to fine schools and get good diplomas, the apostrophe “Mama says, Praise Jesus!” sounds like a prayer, requesting for the miracle to happen for all African Americans so that “The color race will rise!”, to the firmament where elites are shining like stars. “In Theme for English B”, Langston Hughes suggests that the American White people do not have the monopoly of knowledge. He reminds that African Americans and white Americans are all American citizens and must receive the same education:

Being me, it will not be white.  
 But it will be  
 a part of you, instructor  
 you are white-  
 yet a part of me, as  
 I am part of you.  
 That’s American  
 Sometimes perhaps you don’t want to be part of me  
 Nor do I often want to be a part of you  
 But we are, that’s true!  
 As I learn from you  
 I guess you learn from me. (Hughes, 247)

The tone used here is provoking and devoid of any complex. The apostrophe “you” creates a kind of familiarity, intimacy between White Americans and African Americans. In the irony “Being me, it will not be white,” Langston Hughes is making fun of the White American’s eurocentrism that leads them to view themselves as superior to others. Nevertheless, in the paradox “you are white-/yet a part of me, as/I am part of you.”, Langston Hughes stresses the fact that White American and African American are part of the same nation and then share the same history and the same culture. Consequently, in the apostrophes “As I learn from you/I guess you learn from me”, Langston Hughes highlights that both White Americans and African Americans have the same right to have access to good education. In the irony “a part of you, instructor”, he even suggests that an educated African American can even teach a white American. For Isabel V. Sawbill and Daniel Mc, education has been viewed among the African Americans “as a great leveler and source of upward mobility with the closing of the frontier around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.” In fact, good education can give African Americans access to the same jobs occupied by White Americans and make them become also part of the elite.

There is like a “double identity as both colonizer and colonized” in the poem “In Theme for English B”. (Peter, 195). Though, Langston Hughes loves the African American culture and makes even the promotion of it, he doesn’t reject the culture of the colonizer. In fact, he encourages the African Americans to get educated like him, in order to be more equipped to fight against eurocentrism, and kill in themselves any complexity of inferiority. The foreshadowing “I guess you learn from me” expresses his wish that not only White

Americans teach the African Americans, but the latter ones also, in a kind of cultural exchange instruct the former ones about what is not part of their culture. In “Democracy” Langston Hughes also shares his dream of living in an American country where the rights of all Americans to enjoy their freedom will be respected:

I tire so of hearing people say  
 Let things take their course;  
 Tomorrow is another day.  
 I cannot live on tomorrow’s bread  
 I do not need my freedom when I’m dead.  
 I share as much right  
 As the fellow has  
 To stand  
 On my two feet  
 And own the land. (Hughes, 11).

In the oxymoron “I cannot live on tomorrow’s bread”, the bread refers to daily food is qualified as tomorrow’s bread in order to show the absurdity and lack of realism of white people’s promises for better days. Langston Hughes highlights his longing to enjoy true freedom in the hyperbole “I do not need my freedom when I’m dead.” He prefers pragmatism to idealism. By the pun “To stand/On my two feet/And own the land”, Langston Hughes suggests that without freedom a man has lost his humanity for he has no right, not even the right to own a land referring to an home. He is reduced to an animalistic state. In “The Walkers with the Dawn”, Langston Hughes expresses the determination of the African American community to fight for their rights:

Being walkers with the dawn and morning,  
 Walkers with the sun and morning,  
 We are not afraid of night,  
 Nor days of gloom, (Hughes, 11).

The “night” and the “days of gloom” are euphemisms picturing hardships and even death. Nevertheless, Langston Hughes do not focus on such sad outcomes. The expressions “dawn and morning” and “sun and morning” are metaphors used to picture Langston Hughes’ hope and faith in the future. In “Walkers with the sun and morning” they are personified as African Americans’ allies in their victorious and challenging march against White American’s oppression and discrimination. Just as the dawn, the morning and the sun gradually rise, Langston Hughes is confident that African Americans will rise gradually to a better status in the American society. They are convinced like Martin Luther that African Americans’ access to a good education, for instance “will allow them to compete more effectively with the job market and lessen then dependency on affirmative action project” (Gari, 7). Like African American leaders such as Martin Luther who have been ready to face death, the walkers in “The Walkers with the Dawn”, are also ready to face death as they march in order to claim for their basic rights. In “The Negro Mother” and “Mother to Son”, Langston Hughes shows that the struggle must not only be made by men. “The Negro Mother” reads:

Deep in my breast- the Negro mother.  
 I had only hope them, but now through you,  
 Dark ones of today, my dreams must come true,  
 All dark children in the world out there,  
 Remember my sweat, my pain, my despair,  
 Remember my years, heavy with sorrow-  
 And make of those years a torch for tomorrow.  
 Make of my pass a road to light  
 Out of the Darkness, the ignorance, the night.  
 Lift high my banner out of dust.  
 Stand like free men supporting my trust.  
 Believe in the night, let none push you back  
 Remember the whip and the slave's tract  
 Remember how the strong in struggle and strife. (Hughes, 53)

In the synecdoche “Deep in my breast.”, the breast which is located not far from the heart refers to the mother’s deep feeling for her children as well as her role as breast-feeder. In the anaphora “Remember” repeated four times and which sounds like a leitmotiv, Langston Hughes stresses the African American mother as a children’s educator and advice. She is not playing an important role only in her family, but also in the African Community. In the apostrophe “Remember my seat, my pain, my despair/Remember my years, heavy with sorrow” written in an epic style, she appears not only as a mother but also as a leader who has fought with determination despite suffering, pain and despair in order to make sure that her community will live under better conditions of life. In the metaphoric expression “Remember the whip and the slave’s tract”, Langston Hughes reminds how under slavery African women have struggled and endured various kinds of non-human treatments. The whip is the symbol of all the physical and psychological forms of violence inflicted to African American women arbitrarily. But despite all, the African American mother in “The Negro Mother” is confident that all her fights are not in vain. She is confident that she will be reward, even if she may not live to see it for she says in the foreshadowing: “Dark ones of today, my dreams must come true”.

Though the American Dream has deferred, like his speaker, in the “The Negro Mother”, Langston Hughes doesn’t lose hope. He looks ahead for better days and conveys his optimism in some poems such as “Let America be America again”:

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
 I am the Negro bearing slavery’s scars  
 I am the red man driven from the land,  
 I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—  
 And founding only the same of stupid plan  
 Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

By using the anaphora “I am” in four of the verses, in this 5<sup>th</sup> stanza of the poem “Let America be America again”, Langston Hughes identifies himself respectively to the poor, to

the white, to the African American, to the Red Man or the Native American as well as to the immigrant. He rather appears to be less radicalist than Malcolm X, multiculturalist, integrationist. Langston Hughes suggests here that the African American's dream that have been deferred because of White American's racist ideologies. The tone becomes sarcastic in the satire: "And founding only the same of stupid plan/ Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak". Here, he makes fun of the White American dominant ideology according to which it is normal for some to oppress the others, in the society. Nevertheless, in "Cross", Langston Hughes is not necessarily in favor of using violence to pay back to White Americans:

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. (Alfred, 158).

This stanza is made of a series of two enjambed verses in an AB pattern. In "cross" the speaker is a mixed-blooded African American. The substantial theme is "the problem of Negroes of mixed parentage" (Emmanuel, 3). The anaphora "my (...) old man" reminds and insists on the fact that all American citizens are brothers and even are sometimes related by blood. Langston Hughes suggests that there is no need for African Americans to hate White Americans because doing so resorts to hate a brother, a father, a sister or a mother. Instead of hating and being violent towards one another, in the metaphor "I take my curses back" the speaker urges for reconciliation.

### Conclusion

To sum up, the motif of the American Dream is present in Langston Hughes's poems. Using unusual techniques of writing such as rhetoric questions, storytelling, dialogues, humor, linguistic play, juxtaposition, lyrical exuberance, Langston Hughes makes the reader feel the pulse of African Americans, their plight, their feeling as they see their dream be deferred as well as their struggle for the achievement of the American Dream.

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