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# Distinct Cultures Create Similar Themes: A Study of Langston Hughes and Cathy Song's Poetry

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America's rich history has produced ethnically diverse individuals who recorded the emotions and struggles of their time through powerful and inspiring poems. Their poems encourage Americans to support wars, to condemn civil rights abuses, or to understand the liberties and responsibilities of an American citizen. Among these poets, two stand out for their unique rendering of their cultures' strong heritage and their influence in the American society. African-American poet Langston Hughes and Asian-American poet Cathy Song hail from different ethnic backgrounds, but the figurative language found in their respective poems "Theme for English B" and "Lost Sister" indicates similar perspectives on being a minority in the United States. Their similar themes of examining one's identity, rebellion as it relates to freedom, and the significance of acquiring a sense of belonging in the American society are revealed differently in the poems because of the experiences that the poets encounter in their lives. These experiences not only shape the poems' distinct cultural touch, but also add to the poems' universal appeal to readers.

Born in 1902 in Missouri, Langston Hughes lived at the time when African-Americans were discriminated against and delegated as second-class citizens. The prejudicial circumstances he dwelled upon encouraged

him to pursue the life of a writer and a celebrated poet whose work focuses strongly on ethnic freedom. The African-American struggle for equality is mostly depicted in his poem, "Theme for English B," a section of a longer work called "Montage of a Dream Deferred." The poem describes the life of an African-American college student who examines his existence in the American community. The audience is drawn to the persona's plight as he presents his emotions and ambitions to the assignment given to him by his white professor. For him, having a college education is not only an opportunity to defy the current second-class status of African-Americans, but also to encourage others to follow his actions of working for a better standard of living amid discrimination. Therefore, the persona's goals parallel Hughes' struggle for respect and recognition in America through his writing.

Like Hughes, Cathy Song wrote about the lives of ethnic minorities in the United States. Born in Hawaii in 1955, Song is of Chinese and Korean descent. She writes about "the lives of her grandparents in Hawaii following their immigration from China and Korea, the resistance of third generation Asian Americans to the traditional Asian ways and their paradoxical needs to embrace their Asian ancestry" (Huot 352). Her ethnicity is strongly depicted in her poems when she transforms simple actions and objects into something that represents a particular aspect of her ethnic heritage (Tasillo 268). This is evident in her poem, the "Lost Sister" when Song introduces two personae: a daughter who is living in a conservative and tranquil Chinese society and a sister who chooses to leave her ancestral land for the liberal and noisy environment of America. Song's unique treatment of imagery encourages the audience to visualize the poem's two distinct settings, thereby allowing readers to either sympathize or relate more fully with the women's plight

The poems' similar themes emphasize the experiences of minority groups in America. One such theme is the necessity of making a journey for a better life. In Hughes' poem, the speaker travels from Winston-Salem, North Carolina to New York City just to attend college. The move implies the significance of education to the persona, especially when he travels a great distance to attain it. This migration to a foreign environment to seek better opportunities is also evident in the "Lost Sister" when one sister travels to America to escape the restrictive lifestyle of Chinese women. Thus, the personae's journeys reflect the sometimes unfortunate circumstances that cause minority Americans to leave their comfort zone or even their homeland and adjust to a different life elsewhere.

The personae's ethnic identities play a pivotal role in defining the consequences of the journeys they made. In "Theme for English B," the

speaker examines his identity in relation to his white professor, the Harlem community, and the American society as a whole. He wonders why even though he is identified as an American, he must still be discriminated against because of his physical appearance and his desire to attend college. In "Lost Sister," both personae identify themselves as Chinese, but when one immigrates to the United States, that identity is tested as she is enveloped in a world completely opposite to her life in China where her ethnic identity is nurtured. The poem's final stanza stresses the powerful connection between the persona and China:

You find you need China:  
your one fragile identification,  
a jade link  
handcuffed to your wrist. (Song 53-56)

This stanza reiterates the special role of jade in the Chinese tradition where it is highly regarded as a symbol of beauty. By stressing the significance of the jade stone in symbolizing the Chinese identity and the persona's apparent attachment to the stone, Song evokes a feeling of longing for China, a desire fostered by the persona's complete physical separation from her homeland.

The personae's identities correspond with their perception of rebellion to attain freedom. For them, freedom means the ability to act and speak beyond what their ethnic identities present to society. Therefore, to attain such freedom, they rebel. In both poems, a rebellious tone is incorporated. The student in the "Theme for English B" rebels by choosing to write a poem instead of an essay in response to his teacher's ambiguous and somewhat difficult instructions regarding the assignment. The student has a great deal of flexibility with respect to what he will write and how he will write it when the professor simply states:

Go home and write  
a page tonight.  
And let that page come out of you –  
Then, it will be true. (Hughes 2-6)

By formatting the assignment into a poem, the student not only asserts his individuality but also challenges those who infringe upon his freedom (Semansky 2).

In "Lost Sister," leaving China indicates a rebellion against the traditional and restrictive norms of Chinese society. Women in China do not receive the same liberties as women in the United States. Chinese women "never left home / to move freely was a luxury / stolen from them at birth" (Song 11-13). Women were given limited opportunities and were expected to simply pursue a domestic lifestyle. Because of these circumstances, the

“other sister” saw freedom awaiting her in America, where “women can walk along with men” (Song 37). The rebellious tone in both poems highlights the necessity of being or doing something unconventional to hopefully attain freedom.

The poems emphasize that freedom parallels the need for the personae to acquire a sense of belonging in the American community in which they are currently residing. For the student in “Theme for English B,” making the journey to receive a college education also involves taking the steps to assimilate himself into the white community. For him, a college education might mean the opportunity to finally receive more respect from the white community and more freedom, regardless of race. Also, belonging is presented in another way when the persona not only lists what makes him similar to others, but also reiterates that the color of his skin has little significance to the fact that he is an American and therefore part of the American society.

In “Lost Sister,” establishing a sense of belonging in America is difficult because the sister who left has a Chinese upbringing that conflicts with the new American metropolitan lifestyle. The stress involved in adapting to America makes her miss China, the community where she felt she belonged regardless of the constraints placed upon her. Therefore, the newfound freedom she has in America does not prevail over the sadness and emptiness brought about by the physical absence of China. Thus, the major themes of examining one’s identity, rebellion as it relates to freedom and the significance of acquiring a sense of belonging in the American society in both poems have a connection because they all echo the struggles of minority groups in America.

These struggles are best revealed through the poems’ imagery and diction. Hughes and Song successfully describe the personae’s environments by their use of detailed visual imageries. Hughes illustrates Harlem through the persona’s experience of passing by street signs on his way home. According to the persona, he gets home by walking “through a park.../ Eighth Avenue, Seventh” (Hughes 12-13) until he reaches the Young Men’s Christian Association where he rents a room cheaply. The imagery provided in this passage illustrates the personae’s despondent living standards, thus emphasizing that most minority groups in America do have a low income.

Song, on the other hand, illustrates China and America by mentioning simple everyday actions that symbolically correspond to them. The strong presence of the country life in the first few stanzas of the poem is a sharp contrast to the urban imagery apparent in the sixth stanza. The imagery presented echoes the difference between the tranquil and primi-

tive life in rural China where the women were “as dormant as the rooted willows / as redundant as the farmyard hens,” (Song 19-20) and the raucous and very modern life in America, where “dough-faced landlords slip in and out of your keyholes / making claims you don’t understand” (Song 48-50). Song’s description of the personae’s environments reiterates the difficulty for immigrants to balance the influences of different cultures.

Through the imagery describing American places and lifestyle, the poems indicate the poets’ struggles in making a name for themselves amid the stereotypes and racial obstacles placed upon them as minority writers. “Theme for English B” makes references to Columbia University as “the hill above Harlem,” where Hughes studied and later left because of the pressure placed upon him by his white colleagues. For Hughes, having his work published and then accepted was difficult at first because of the lack of opportunities for him to showcase his work and later because of the financial problems brought about by the Great Depression. Like Hughes, Song has faced problems as well. The persona’s difficult life in America suggests Song’s effort to free her work from the standards placed on Asian-American writers. For most of her career, Song has been critical about being labeled as an Asian-American or Hawaiian writer because she prefers her work to have a more universal appeal (Tasillo 266). Thus, it is through the personae’s connection in their particular ethnic origins, of which people have their own version, which makes these writers’ work appeal so powerfully to people of all backgrounds.

Neither poem has an apparent rhyme scheme, yet the poems are easy to read and to comprehend mainly because of the simple and informal diction that reveals the poets’ attachment to their ethnic identities. With regards to diction, the words “colored” and “Harlem” in “Theme for English B” are closely associated to the African-American identity. Similarly, Chinese culture comes alive in “Lost Sister” with the inclusion of the phrase “fermented roots, Mah-Jong tiles and firecrackers” (Song 46). These objects are exclusive representations of the Chinese culture. The lighting of firecrackers annually, for example, originated in China and the act is believed to draw away bad spirits. Yet regardless of how strongly the poets present their respective ethnicities, they manage to free their work from just being considered as just an African or Asian poem that happens to be written in America, but into poems that allow readers to relate with the personae’s lives.

Langston Hughes and Cathy Song have written poems that recognize the plight of African-Americans and Asian-Americans in identifying themselves fully as Americans, especially when the society itself provides barriers that prevent them from integrating themselves completely. The

poems reveal to the readers that the poets value their ethnic identities, their freedom, and most especially, their being American citizens. They have provided different perspectives on such themes because they grew up in different times and circumstances. Yet regardless of how dissimilar their approach is in presenting the themes, the poets created works that have a universal appeal. Readers from all over the world can easily relate to the personae's struggles, while simultaneously appreciating the poets' talents in skillfully communicating those challenges through the use of pen and paper.

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