

**Self-Actualization in the  
Poetry of Langston Hughes:  
A Psychoanalytic Study**

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**Abstract**

The objective of this study is to widen the scope of reading the poetry of Langston Hughes, one of the main leaders of Afro-American poetry. The psychological approach represented by the American psychologist Abraham Maslow is adopted and applied to the literary output of Langston Hughes. Maslow's theory of self-actualization can be traced in Hughes's poetry showing the poet's ability to triumph over the limited realm of the Afro-Americans' identity crisis. The poet's psychological balance helped him a lot to interweave his fellow people's dilemma with all the hopes of the would-be American Dream. Although he does not exclude himself from the daily sufferings of his people, yet he takes the issue in his poetry beyond the horizon of the stereotypical image of the Afro-American sufferers in a white-dominated society. The study is an attempt to stress the idea that there are Afro-American writers who could set themselves free from the chain of the Afro-American dilemma.

**Keywords:** Maslow - Self-Actualization - Hughes - Identity Crisis

**المستخلص**

تهدف هذه الدراسة الى تعميق النظرة لشعر لانجستون هيوز باعتباره احد اهم الشعراء الامريكان من اصل افريقي و الذي لعب دورا هاما في جذب الانتباه لقضية شعبه و انتاجهم الادبي. و لتعميق هذه النظرة لشعره تقترح الدراسة تطبيق منهج التحليل النفسي ممثلا في التسلسل الهرمي للاحتياجات الانسانية الذي وضعه عالم النفس الشهير ابراهام ماسلو. و يأتي علي قمة هذا الهرم الاحساس بالذات و هي نظرية يمكن تطبيقها علي شعر هيوز تثبت ان هذا الشاعر استطاع ان يحقق توازنا نفسيا بعيدا عن صراعات بني جلدته بحثا عن هويتهم و هروبا من وحش العنصرية الكاسر الذي كان يغرز مخالفه الدنيئة في جسد الامريكان من اصل افريقي من ان الي آخر. و انطلاقا من هذا الثبات النفسي الذي تميز به الشاعر استطاع ان يحيي في اعماق شعبه الاحساس بالفخر باصولهم الافريقية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** ماسلو – الاحساس بالذات – هيوز – ازمة الهوية

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**Introduction**

The objective of this study is to re-read the poetry of the Afro-American poet Langston Hughes (1902-1967), one of the leading Afro-American writers and the main figure of the Harlem Renaissance Movement of the 1930s. In this study, his poetry is dealt with out of a new psycho analytic perspective: self-actualization theory propagated by the famous American psychologist Abraham Maslow (1908-1970). The hierarchy of needs hypothesized by Maslow can be traced throughout the literary output of Langston Hughes. Such an application of Maslow's theory can enrich reading the poetry of Hughes taking the reader to untrodden ways in the realm of one of the outstanding figures in the history of Afro-American poetry.

In his poetry, Langston Hughes does not show excessive amount of suffering from an identity crisis familiar to his fellow-writers, though he shows faithful interest in the basic issues of his fellow people. His poetry indicates psychological health and ability to go beyond the Afro-American identity crisis. Applying the rules of Maslow's theory of self-actualization to Hughes's poetry, one finds out that it is just an incarnation of the main bulk of the theory. What attracts the researcher to Langston Hughes's poetry is that the character of the poet himself does not confine itself to the limited chains of the Afro-American crisis; instead, he interweaves traumatic conditions of his people into the longed- for American dream stressing the idea that attaining such a dream can be realized by all Americans: white and black. In this paper, an attempt is done by the researcher to show how far Langston Hughes is a typical incarnation of Maslow's theory of self-actualization.

**Abraham Maslow's " Hierarchy of Needs":**

Revolting against traditional psycho-analysis which may reduce psychology to unconscious and scientific mechanism, Abraham Maslow attacks Sigmund Freud's theory of needs and instinct thinking that " the study of crippled, stunted, immature and unhealthy specimens can yield

only a cripple psychology and a cripple Philosophy "(*Motivation* 234). Hence, he introduces "Humanistic Psychology" which renders a positive image of human beings who are capable of creativity and action. According to this theory, man's behaviours are justified through man's conscious rather than unconscious mind. Thus, unlike Freud who interprets human actions out of some subconscious motivations, Maslow comes to study "what happened to people after their basic needs were satisfied" (Hergenhahn 523). Hence, Maslow puts a hierarchy of needs assuming that human beings pass through many developmental stages in their evolution toward self-actualization. The hierarchy entails that human beings are born with a set of human needs that must be fulfilled in order to achieve psychological health. Such a hierarchy begins with psychological needs, followed by safety needs, belonging and love needs, self-esteem needs, and finally self-actualization need. This hierarchy of needs is a continual dynamic process of satisfying needs. Maslow illustrates:

"It is quite true that man lives by bread alone – when there is no bread. But what happens to man's desires when there is plenty of bread... At once other (and higher) needs emerge and these, rather than physiological hungers, dominate the organism. And when these in turn are satisfied, again new (and still higher) needs emerge and so on. (*Motivation* 38)

Accordingly, once a need is partially satisfied, it no longer dominates the scene and another need arises to take its place. And if a need is not satisfied at all, the individual remains on that level and is unable to progress toward self-actualization. Moreover, this process of self-actualization is not confined to successful persons only. Maslow thinks that both ordinary and extra-ordinary people can be self-actualizers (*Motivation* 46). Having a look at the biographies of some people, Maslow finds out that such people are characterized by psychological mental health represented by their awareness of their continual need for growth and development. He assumes that every person has that desire to move up the hierarchy of needs towards the level of self-actualization. Furthermore, self-actualization differs among individuals. For some people, self-actualization can be achieved through creativity in a work of art or literature; for others it can be realized through sports, education, or architecture (*Motivation* 46).

Throwing more light on his theory, Maslow propagates that two things are required to attain self-actualization: self-exploration and action. He identifies eight ways for self-actualization. First, individuals have to

experience things wholly, vibrantly, and unselfishly. Second, they should consider self-actualization or their life a constant process of making choices and decisions to be totally honest with themselves and with others. Third, self-actualized persons ought to realize that there is a self to be actualized and that their feeling should be expressed without being affected by any other external validations. Fourth, they should feel confident and responsible when making decisions. Fifth, they have to trust their abilities, listen to their inner voices and impulses, and be brave enough in taking actions or forming opinions. Sixth, they must get rid of illusions and false notions, and they should discover their potentials knowing their points of strength and weakness. Seventh, they should realize that self—actualization is a process of continuous self-development and fulfillment of potentials. Eighth, they should give up defenses and identify their mission in life (*Farther* 44-45).

Maslow identifies certain characteristics common among people who are judged to be self-actualized. However, he stresses the idea that self-actualized people may not have all these characteristics; some of them are adequate to make of their holders self-actualized persons. Foremost among such characteristics is their efficient perception of reality and experience; self-actualizers have an unusual ability to see reality as it is and judge people and situations honestly and efficiently. Another characteristic is their continuous freshness of appreciation and peak experiences; self-actualized people experience old things as if they see them for the first time, and are able to grasp the moments of intense excitement and high ecstasy. Self-actualizers are spontaneous and autonomous; they are not liable to wear masks, play roles, or feel confined in their thoughts and actions. They are autonomous in the sense that they are independent and do not depend on what people think or feel about things (*Motivation* 157-159).

An all-important characteristic of self-actualized people is their greater acceptance of self and others; they are free of "overriding guilt, crippling shame, or severe anxiety (*Motivation* 159-160). Self-actualizers are creative persons as they are psychologically healthy, and this is shown through such qualities as independence, bravery, integration, and freedom (*Motivation* 170-171). They also have interpersonal relations with others; their relations with friends and lovers are deeper and more intimate than those of average people. Love is a central element in their relations with others. However, they sometimes detach themselves from other people

and appreciate their privacy in a state of autonomy and self-understanding.

Self-actualized people are characterized by social interest and problem centeredness; they are inextricably involved in social issues of humanity, and they are keen on helping people and solving their problems. They find their full satisfaction in taking part in any efforts exerted to help those who are in need. They are also independent of any cultural influences; they tend to set themselves free from culture-bound rules. Self-actualizers are in harmony with their culture. Their ability to defy any cultural influences makes them stronger and more resistant to the hardships they may encounter. This also guards them against any feelings of dichotomy transcending any discrepancies may result in.

### **Langston Hughes: A Biographical Note**

Having a bird's eye view of Langston Hughes's life shows the poet's aptitude to achieve self-actualization. In spite of many adverse incidents in his life, he never loses his psychological balance and always transcends any traumatic conditions his fellow-people suffer from. His father and mother were totally different. While his father was a materialistic and greedy man whose chief interest in life was to make money, his mother was not money-oriented and her main interest was to overcome any handicaps without being affected by the stereotypical image white Americans had about Afro-Americans in general (Meltzer 20). His mother was always ready to help and even to fight for the rights of free people (*Big Sea* 14). Langston Hughes has been strongly affected by his mother inheriting this humanitarian and deeply-rooted love for Afro-Americans and poor people everywhere (Berry 19). This is a typical approach of a self-actualized person. His grandmother has also impressed him and she is behind his love of books finding solace in them from the feelings of loneliness. His grandmother was a very proud woman who would never beg or borrow anything from anyone. This taught Hughes to be proud of himself and of his race, and to be independent (*Big Sea* 16).

### **Langston Hughes's Psychological Balance**

Despite being the real spokesman of the Harlem Renaissance Movement, formed during the 1920s and 1930s of the twentieth century to urge the world to look at Afro-Americans' rights and literature, he never suffered from an identity crisis; he never felt being torn between the white

American culture and his in-born Afro-American one. He always thought that his fellow-people suffered from a feeling of double-consciousness, a phenomenon wherein one looks at one's identity through the eyes of others and measures his worth against the world's stereotypes. Hughes diagnoses the racial problem as one caused by two factors: first, the white man regards his darker brother as lazy, uneducated, immoral, unambitious, cunning, lewd, and unclean; second, the Afro-American sees himself as inferior, unworthy, and impotent. Some of those who suffer from this identity crisis are black in colour but try to behave as whites, thereby revealing irreconcilable tension going within them. Some others, Hughes himself being one of them, think that in order to overcome such a divided identity, Afro-Americans are required to encourage a feeling of pride in their black colour seeing that it is a beautiful one. This is the remedy Hughes believes in as a means through which the ordinary Afro-American can achieve psychological balance compromising his torn identity. He himself writes,

To my mind, it is the duty of the younger Negro artist .... to change through the force of his art that old whispering " I want to be white" to " Why should I want to be white?" I am a Negro – and beautiful (Negro Artist 228)

In these lines, Hughes asks all Afro- American artists to lay aside their feeling of inferiority, to portray proudly " Negro faces", and to disregard the white world standards of beauty. Instead, they should be proud of tackling Afro-American themes and styles. According to him, this confirmation of self-expression is an indication of their ethnic distinctness within American society and a glorification of Afro-American identity. By having these steps, Hughes thinks that all Afro-Americans can restore, like him, their psychological balance and thus transcend the chains of identity crisis.

### **Langston Hughes: the Self-Actualizer**

The problem Langston Hughes and his fellow people suffered from is that though they have been born and have lived in America, Americans have dealt with them in a stepmother fashion. So their resort to their African origin is nothing but an attempt to enjoy the feeling of loving and being loved. As a self-actualizer, Hughes is not fully indulged in the racial problem his people suffer from. However, he tries by every other means to help them overcome the effects of such a problem. By asking them to be proud of their origin and the beauty of their dark skin, Hughes wants them to restore their psychological balance.

In his own poetry, Langston Hughes practices what he preaches and dedicates a large number of poems in which he boasts of blackness. Many poems speak of the beauty of the Afro-American woman to emphasize his pride in his African origin, the beauty of the soul of his people, and their moral strength which have enabled them to survive. In his poem "When Sue Wears Red," he describes the physical as well as spiritual beauty of a black woman and ascribes to her nobility and royalty:

When Susanna Jones wears red  
A queen from some time – dead  
Egyptian night  
Walks once again.  
.....  
And the beauty of Susanna Jones in red  
Burns in my heart a love – fire sharp like pain.  
(*Selected Poems* 68)

Susanna Jones is an incarnation of the Afro-American race at large. In choosing the image of the queen Hughes colours her beauty with a mythological paint; she is thought to be Cleopatra of Egypt. The message communicated here is that the black woman's beauty should be a source of pride in the Afro-American race in general. Such a message can be regarded as a typical self-actualization principle.

Not only does Langston Hughes boast of his black colour, but also he praises his African origin and the rare qualities of Africans. Moreover, he resorts to every possible means to erase any humiliating qualities attributed to his fellow-people. Throughout his life he always refers to his positive attitude to Africa, the very cradle of human civilization. Being more of a self-actualized person, he thinks that any stigmatizing notions construed upon his fellow-people are nothing but a direct insult upon him. (*Remember Me To Harlem* 22) Furthermore, he regards all whites' attempts to propagate certain negative stereotypical images of his people as a plot against them to devastate in them any sense of dignity, honour, pride, or hopes of attaining their equality and freedom. In his poem, "Argument," he objects to one of these stereotypes:

White is right,  
Yellow mellow,  
Black, get back!  
Do you believe that Jack  
Sure do!  
Then you're a dope

For which there aint no hope.

Black is fine

And, God knows

It is mine

*(Selected Poems 262)*

Thus, the first few lines reflect the attempt of whites to transplant in the minds of their dark brothers the notion of white supremacy and the inherent inferiority and ignorance of Afro-Americans; Hughes rejects this idea of biological supremacy based on colour.

As a self-actualized person, Hughes also shows his interest in the deep cultural heritage of Afro-Americans which has a continuity throughout the ages. His famous poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" echoes the idea:

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.

*(Selected Poems 4)*

The poet associates Afro-Americans' souls with the great and immortal rivers of Africa. Through referring to real examples of rivers, the poet refers to the prehistoric existence of the souls of his people.

Langston Hughes, the self-actualizer, also boasts of the physical and spiritual strength which enabled his people to survive and even thrive in the midst of great adversity. In "Spirituals," he describes the physical strength of his people as:

Rocks and the firm roots of trees.

The rising shafts of mountains.

Something strong to put my hands on.

*(Selected Poems 28)*

The poet here regards his people's strength as that of the solid and indestructible elements of nature. In other poems, he sings of his people's spiritual strength which helps them overcome any obstacles they may come across in their daily life. His people resort to two tools to aid them in their daily drama of survival: singing and laughing. In the same poem above, he says (Song is a strong thing./ I heard my mother singing/ When life hurt her) (28). the poem reveals the black self differently in all its beauty and strength. Hughes is one of the first poets of the 1920s to show the beauty and grace of ordinary Afro-Americans. (Duale 2)



In another poem, " Still Here," he speaks of the second tool his people use to survive;

I've been scarred and battered.  
My hopes the wind done scattered.  
Snow has friz me, sun has baked me.  
Looks like between 'em  
They done tried to make me  
Stop laughin' , stop livin', stop  
But I don't care  
I'm still here

*(Selected Poems 123)*

Thus, nothing in the world will stop Afro-Americans' laughing in the face of any adversities they encounter.

An all-important characteristic of self-actualizers deeply-rooted in Langston Hughes is his interest in the problems of others trying to give a hand towards solving such problems. Identifying himself with the Afro-American masses whose dream of freedom and equality has been thwarted, he considers himself their real spokesman and their dream-keeper. In " The Dream Keeper," Hughes writes about his people and for his people on hopes, dreams, aspirations, life, and love. (Duale 1) He addresses his people saying:

Bring me all of your dreams,  
You dreamers.  
Bring me all of your  
Heart melodies  
That I may wrap them  
In a blue cloud-cloth  
Away from the too-rough fingers of the world

*(Weary Blues 94)*

As an honest keeper of the dreams, not only of his race, but also of all sufferers of the world, Hughes wants to preserve these dreams untouched by the harsh fingers of the world. In another poem, "Dream", Hughes urges his people to stick to their dreams, because, according to him, life without such dreams is meaningless and unworthy. (Miller 5) He writes,

Hold fast to dreams  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken winged  
That can not fly  
Hold fast to dreams  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field

Frozen with snow  
( *Dream Keeper* 7)

Commenting on Langston Hughes's recurrent speech on dreams, Tracy writes:

“Dreams have always figured prominently in the works of Langston Hughes. Hughes's work is devoted to outlining, celebrating, and agitating on behalf of the dreams of oppressed and marginalized peoples worldwide with particular focus on the dreams of African-Americans.” (223)

Afro-Americans' dream of freedom has always been at the core of Langston Hughes's mind and heart. As a self-actualizer, his heart is filled with hopes of freedom in the years to come. As he grows older, the dream of freedom assumes definite shape:

To fling my arms wide  
In some place of the sun,  
To whirl and dance  
Till the white day is done.  
Then rest at cool evening  
Beneath a tall tree  
While night comes on gently,  
Dark like me, ----  
That is my dream  
(*Weary Blues* 43)

Thus, the dream of all Afro-Americans is to attain freedom and equality. The poet's mastery is revealed when he uses two suggestive symbols: the day and the sun, which stand for white people, and the cool night that is associated with the poet and his race (Locke 44-46).

Equality has also been a need Langston Hughes speaks of for the sake of his people who suffer from racial discrimination. In "Brothers," he expresses his hope that equality can be fully realized among all Americans regardless of their colour, race, or origin:

We're related-you and I,  
You from the West Indies  
I from Kentucky  
Kinsmen-you and I  
You from Africa  
I from the U.S.A.  
Brothers-you and I  
(*Selected Poems* 265-66)

It does not matter where the American does come from, since all of them are bound to the same destiny.

In his poetry, Langston Hughes defends his fellow-people's economic exploitation at the hands of white southerners. In "Share-Croppers," he writes:

Just a herd of Negroes  
Driven to the field,  
Plowing, planting, hoeing,  
To make the cotton yield.  
When the cotton is picked  
And the work is done  
Boss man takes the money,  
And we get none.

*(The Collected Works 165)*

Thus, Afro-Americans help in cultivating and harvesting the cotton. However, they are not paid their due share of the crop being exploited economically. The poet speaks on behalf of his people giving an outcry against their suffering because of these discriminatory malpractices.

Throughout his life, Langston Hughes has always been an enthusiastic lover of his fellow-people and their African origin. When he went to Lincoln university, he found out that there were no courses promoting Afro-Americans' racial pride, or enlightening students about the contributions of their people to civilization in general. Recording such a humiliating situation, he writes in *The Big Sea*:

There was an unwritten official color line  
that said no Negro could teach on the faculty.  
And no one of its alumni had ever been asked  
to join the Board of Trustees ..... there was  
something inherently superior in white teachers  
that Negro teachers didn't have. (306-307)

Thus, racial discrimination practiced in educational establishments worried the poet a lot and urged him to give an outcry against such behaviors. The outcry against Afro-Americans' suffering of such acts of discrimination and segregation comes in Hughes's poem "Theme for English B," wherein the speaker argues with his teacher that he is an ordinary human being:

I guess being colored doesn't make me not like  
the same things other folks like who are other races  
So will my page be colored that I write?  
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 a part of you.  
That 's American

(*My People* 24)

Hughes expresses his anger because of such a degrading situation his fellow-people encounter in classes of education. On behalf of his people, the poet presents the debasing and demeaning qualities attributed to his people by white-Americans. The poet who does so is a typical self-actualizer.

Being a self-actualizer who has great sympathy for his people, Hughes expresses his annoyingness towards racial discrimination even in the field of medicine. In the South, white hospitals were usually closed to Afro-American doctors, nurses, and patients alike. No matter how critical the case was; the Afro-American patient was not allowed to be admitted in any white hospital. Recording his rejection of such practices, Hughes writes in “Red Cross”:

The Angel of mercy's  
Got her wings in the mud,  
And all because of  
Negro blood.

(*Jim Crow* 8)

Thus, the speaker satirizes those who are supposed to be the angels of mercy because they discriminate among people on the basis of color. By resorting to discrimination, he thinks, they had dipped their angelic “wings” in “the mud.” Hughes here protests against the inferior picture of his fellow-people in the minds of white-Americans.

On the political level, Langston Hughes shows his interest in his fellow-people’s suffering because of the bare fact that they are deprived of the least human rights in a society that sings day and night of its democracy. On behalf of his people, he portrays and ridicules this discrepancy between the proclaimed idealism and the stark reality of American democracy in his poem “The Black Man Speaks”:

I swear to the Lord  
I still can't see  
why democracy means  
everybody but me.

.....  
Down South you make me ride  
In a Jim Crow car.

.....

If we 're fighting to create  
A free world tomorrow,  
Why not end right now

Old Jim Crow's sorrow?

(*Jim Crow 5*)

In this poem, the speaker questions the rationality of fighting for the sake of democracy abroad while Afro-Americans are "Jim Crowed" at home. He further asks those in authority to put a prompt end to such practices of the south if they are really seeking a free world for tomorrow.

As a self-actualized person, Langston Hughes enlarges the problem of his people's suffering to include the pains of all the oppressed all over the world. He recommends all who lead a traumatic kind of life to co-operate and unite to get their prohibited rights of equal being. In his poem, "Union," he proclaims:

Not me alone --  
I know now --  
But all the whole oppressed  
Poor world,  
White and black,  
Must put their hands with mine  
To shake the pillars of those temples  
Wherein the false gods dwell  
And worn-out altars stand  
(*Vintage Hughes 31*)

Hughes asks all sufferers in the world to unite till they get their rights, though it is not an easy job to do. As for oppressors who are strong enough and their "temple" and "false gods," Hughes stresses the severity of the struggle all the oppressed will face on their way towards salvation. Speaking about Langston Hughes's cosmopolitan interest, Gibson writes, "Hughes wanted to break down distinctions" and that many poems of his "express his desire to see unity among people and a social, economic, and cultural equality among the peoples, not only of America, but of the world" (*Modern Black Poets 45*)

In his poetry, Langston Hughes could cleverly link his Afro-American dreams of equality and freedom to the overall American dream. His commitment to the American ideal is deeply felt and abiding. He is assured in his inner self that in time justice will prevail and all the promises of the dream will be fulfilled. His early poem "I, Too, Sing America" is testimony to his faith:

I, too, sing America  
I am the darker brother  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh  
And eat well,  
And grow strong  
Tomorrow,  
I' ll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody 'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the Kitchen,"  
Then.

*(I, Too, Am America 12)*

Thus, tomorrow, the poet feels, will bring him and his people equality and freedom, and no power on earth will deprive them of this essential right of being.

### **Conclusion**

Having such a condensed look at the poetry of Langston Hughes, one discovers that all the principles of Abraham Maslow's theory of self-actualization can be applied to his poetry. Such an application indicates that Hughes never suffered from an identity crisis which most other Afro-American writers have complained of. His psychological balance helped him transcend the limits of the racial problem. Out of this psychological balance, Hughes could provide more logical ground for all the calls for liberty and equality among all Americans with a least consideration of race, origin, or ethnicity.

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