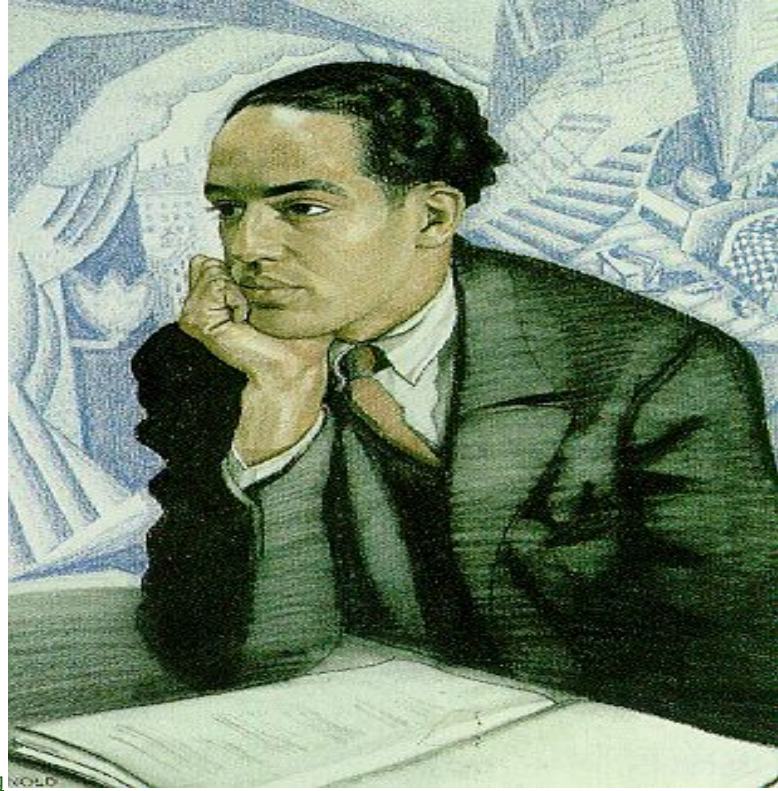


Langston Hughes: The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain



Thursday October 8th 2009 by [abag](#) [WOLF](#) [ond](#)

"The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain"(1926) was a short essay written by poet **Langston Hughes** for *The Nation* magazine. It became the **manifesto of the Harlem Renaissance**. In it Hughes said that black artists in America should stop copying whites, that they will never create anything great that way. Instead they should be proud of who they are, proud to be black, and draw from black culture. **Not "white is right" but, as we would now say, "Black is beautiful"**.

One day a promising young black poet told him, **"I want to be a poet – not a Negro poet."**Which to Hughes was just another way of saying, "I want to be a white poet" or, more to the point, "I want to be white". **Which told Hughes that he would never be great:**

For no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself.

But there is **more at stake than just great art:**

... it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through the force of his art that old whispering "I want to be white," hidden in the aspirations of his people, to "Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro – and beautiful"?

The artist, by discovering himself and his people, helps to **free their minds.**

America tries to make everyone the same – **standardization**. One size fits all. Blacks are fortunate to the degree that they escape that standardization. It gives the black artist material to draw on that few white artists can.

Yet **rich and middle-class blacks** *wanted* to be standardized, **wanted to be as white as they could be** – in how they looked, dressed, acted, sang and worshipped. They read white books and white magazines, watched white films. They **looked down on the blues, spirituals and even jazz**. Because "white is best". Their mothers told them, **"Don't be like niggers"** and their fathers said, "Look how well a white man does things."

They **never learned to see their own beauty** but instead learned to feel shame about their blackness. And so through their minds whisper the words, "I want to be white." This is the racial mountain that Hughes said the black artist must climb.

In addition to standardization, the black artist hears this:

- **the black middle-class:** "Oh, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are."
- **whites:** "Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you."

Both would have kept Jean Toomer from writing "Cane" (1923), one of the best works of Black American prose in those days.

Hughes:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.