

## LULLABY TO A LITTLE BLACK GIRL

by

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When I came across Langston Hughes's poem "Lullaby," which was published in *The Crisis* magazine in March 1926, I started thinking about human rights and marginality nowadays. I could certainly feel that this poem speaks to me in a particular way which prompted me to extend the original by providing my own version of it. This highlights the global qualities of poetry as well as of culture since they can both travel through space and time as well as transcend ethnic and racial barriers. In this poem, Hughes's persona chooses a lullaby so as to communicate with his persona, that of a little black baby. The moon and the stars that dominate the skies at nighttime become vivid images that affect the tone of the poem. The black baby in the poem represents the future of the black race and, to an extent, of humanity. Moreover, children are always the victims of history and society because they have no say in the decisions made; even the ones which affect them are always made by adults who sometimes overlook the effect that these decisions may have on the fate of their children. As a result, in my own version of Hughes's original poem, I've decided to elaborate on the issues raised above by adding some of my own thoughts in an effort to diversify and expand the initial argument. In my version, prominence is given to the future as this is seen through the children's eyes. Thus, I attempted to respond to Hughes's "Lullaby" with my "Lullaby to a Little Black Girl."

Little black girl

Tiny, precious thing....

    sleeping here so innocently.

You belong to the dark night

so you sleep with the stars.

Bright shiny stars like the future ahead that awaits you.

Shall I sing you a lullaby?

You have slept in the dark of the night for so long.

There was no bright star paving your way in life.

But now the time has come for you to meet the brightest stars of all

    THE SUN

You will unite with the bright sun

And

let its light embrace you and hold you in your cradle

Little black girl.....

Shall I sing you a lullaby?

you have been the object of exclusion

but now it's time for inclusion.

To society, to the world.

As black you are different,

As female you are different

But as a person you should not differ from everybody else.

You ADD "color" to a monotonous composition of people called "society."

You should be treasured, not hated

You should be loved, not separated.

Little black girl

**THIS IS YOUR LULLABY.**

What this re-writing process has enabled me to appreciate is the tone of the original: Hughes's positive feeling that after all the hardships black people have been through it is now time for light to shine. I expanded this view in order to include other manifestations of marginalization by moving beyond ethnic and racial origins. As a result, the little black baby of the original changes into a little girl, whose blackness exceeds boundaries and limitations. As for the moon and the stars that Langston refers to so as to talk about the child's bright future, in my own version I only talk about the sun so as to intensify the effect the light has on the portrayal of a better future. Although I am not African-American like Hughes is, I feel that I can connect with the girl in my poem. Despite the fact that women nowadays, especially in Western culture, experience more and more equality with men they are still discriminated for just being female. A woman might be discriminated in a job interview where the most common question always has to do with her private life instead of her qualifications. On the contrary, a man is never asked if he is single or married or has children but what is of interest in this case is his education and prior experience. There are also other manifestations of discrimination beyond race and gender that I decided to respond to here by extending the connotations deriving from the words "dark"(1) and "black"(4) so as to include difference as well, as suggested by the repetition of the word "different"(20-21). I am of the belief that art moves beyond race, ethnicity or gender and that it can be universal in the sense that the feelings that art evokes appeal to all people regardless of their sociopolitical, cultural and gender background. Thus art, in this sense, acquires a universal quality that, paradoxical though it may seem, does not stage difference as something that divides people but as something that unites them. As I express in my poem, I am optimistic that one day there will be no racial, gender or ethnic discrimination and marginalization in the world.

Hughes in his poem, being himself an African-American, refers to the child as “My little dark baby” (1) to allude to all the children of his race. In my version, I prefer to universalize the African-American experience so as to open it to various interpretations with regard to marginalization due to racial, political or societal reasons. Therefore, the words “dark” or “black” do not necessarily refer to race but to discrimination itself as a concept. I chose to place emphasis on the positive portrayals of people in general. Through the poem, I attempt to promote a future in which any kind of discrimination will be eradicated and people will celebrate their differences, whichever they are. Both poems share an optimistic tone and an optimistic view of the future, as one may infer that Hughes offers a kind of reconciliation between black and white people where he pictures the “Great diamond moon, / Kissing the night” (16-17). One may take the light of the moon to stand for white people, while the black night stands for black people. In this case, the reader may perceive this image as one of reconciliation between black and white people complementing one another and harmoniously coexisting. In this way, Hughes is optimistic about the peaceful coexistence between the two groups in the future. The same kind of optimism is sustained in my own version of the original poem, as seen in the following lines: “But now the time has come for you to meet the brightest star of all/ THE SUN/ You will unite with the bright sun/ And/ let its light embrace you and hold you in your cradle” (10-14). Here my intention is to express this kind of blending of blackness and whiteness like two people becoming one in an embrace. The image of the sun in this version serves a dual function similarly to the diamond moon in Hughes’s poem, opening it up to multiple interpretations. It signifies the bright future that embraces the dark past and, at the same time, the amiable coexistence of black and white people. One might also perceive it as two completely different things uniting to create a whole as the sun and the moon combine to form the cycle of a day.

The issue of marginalization has been in the forefront of society’s problems for many years. In the recent decades, people of political, scholarly and humanitarian communities have been attempting to resolve this problem by highlighting its causes and pointing to certain solutions. In this response to Hughes poem, I attempt to create similar effects for another marginalized group, that of women. What attracted me the most in Hughes’s poem was his intention to bring lots of different elements together, like people and stars, such as the earth, and unite them under one emotion, that of love. Therefore, in writing my own version of his poem I attempted to respond to the positive tone of his poem and this feeling of love he promotes. Hughes’s poem “Lullaby” made me ponder on the size of the responsibility that black people felt for the future of their children. They aspired to a brighter and better future than their own and they fought for it. This made me stop taking the advancement of my own future as a given, while it encouraged me to fight for a better future as I imagine it and dream it to be. In other words, I believe that Hughes poem awakened in me a fighting spirit that up until now had been dormant.

Moreover, I believe that my version of Hughes’s poem responds to an inner need to communicate certain ideas about the way people behave towards what they find they differ from. I have observed that quite often people are alarmed of what is different from them and they tend to reject it, marginalize it or isolate it. Be it an idea, a belief, a work of art or a person, once people decide that it does not belong to what they perceive as “normal” they reject it without allowing themselves to view things in a different way. For instance, people might reject a work of art as being trash because it

might not ascribe to what they perceive as high art or the mainstream notion of art. Similarly people might reject a belief or an idea because they do not understand it or because they are afraid of it. It seems to me that people should not only learn to tolerate the different but also embrace it because through these different elements something good might come up. I believe that every person is different and he/she brings forward different ideas and beliefs about all kinds of things and this is the kind of difference that matters. This difference I mention creates a world that is multilayered, that is constantly renewed by the contribution of each and every one of its members. Thus while Hughes's aim was to make people accept the difference of black people and embrace it as being a positive one, I expand his argument in an attempt to make others realize that all that is different is not necessarily harmful and that difference can be a positive thing if one learns to accept it and value it.

Overall, art can have a universal quality as far as the emotions it can generate are concerned. It always offers food for thought and it can always affect other people from various backgrounds, generating various emotions and making them ponder on various ideas. What appears to have affected me the most in Hughes's poem is the fact that it has managed to impress me for various reasons' despite the fact that I differ in many ways from Hughes's persona. This makes me hope that if people learn to accept difference and not marginalize it then the entire world will be in a constant conversation if I may say like the one I attempted to do with Hughes's art.

### **Works Cited**

Hughes, Langston. "Lullaby." *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*. Ed. Venetia K. Patton and Maureen Honey. 3rd ed. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008. 466. Print