

Purity through Nature: A Comparative Analysis of Metaphoric Structures Linked to Nature in the Poetic Works of John Donne and Langston Hughes

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Abstract

When poets manipulate and blend categorical language and imagery through the use of metaphor, they change the reality within the poetic work. The purpose of this paper is to extend on the already occurring argument in regards to the role of nature and metaphor in literary works. This paper will demonstrate how images of nature work as tools of social validation for ostracized lifestyles and racial groups. Within the frame of a comparative analysis of John Donne's "The Bait" and "The Primrose" and Langston Hughes' "Dreams" and "Dream Variation" this argument focuses on the way metaphors turn towards nature for purity and then include people within the newly constructed natural image. Questions that are developed and answered are (a) How is metaphor used as a tool of social validation? (b) How can images of nature increase persuasiveness and influence social acceptance? and (c) How has the use of nature evolved over poetic history?

What is nature? What laws define and conceptualize nature? These are questions that scholars often ask themselves. Today's media has become hypersensitive regarding nature and often highlights laws that attempt to protect the environment, to social concerns over the o-zone layer and depleting fossil fuels. Nature has been depicted in every art form since the beginning of civilization, from cave drawings, architecture, oral tales, and later poetry. Some of the most popular poetic forms, such as Haiku, Pastoral and Sonnets are dependent on nature as the center image within the form. The question then remains: Why are so many writers drawn to nature in their writing, and what purpose does images of nature serve in poetic works? It is not coincidental that the words "Naturalism" "Naturalized" and "Natural" are all founded on the word "Nature." Nature, uncorrupted by man or any outside force is believed to be pure, and within language writers often seek to attach man-made societies to nature. For this reason, throughout American literary history you will find rural and city poets evoking the offspring of nature, such as birds and trees. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the power of metaphor inherent in its ability to empower "outsiders." In order to analyze how Langston

Hughes used nature to validate a positive image of the African American race, this argument comparatively analyses John Donne's "The Bait" and "The Primrose" and Langston Hughes' "Dreams" and "Dream Variations." Within these works, metaphors turn towards nature for purity and then include people within the newly constructed natural image.

The Harlem Renaissance, also known as The New Negro Movement, or the Negro Renaissance, was a major cultural birth for the African American community in the United States. Throughout the early 1920's, in what has come to be known as the Great Migration, African Americans from the South flocked to the North. Many of these men and women fled North to escape the dangers of Southern racism that took form in lynchings, church burnings, and other hate crimes. Just as the English Renaissance and Reformation period were a period of revival for English society and culture as the classics were returned to, the Harlem Renaissance was also a revival. Many scholars argue it was not a revival, but instead a beginning, as "Afro-American literature insert[ed] itself as proof of the equality of Euro-Americans."¹ Harlem Renaissance writers such as Langston Hughes, found themselves quickly immersed within a thriving and very active African American community.

In order to understand how Langston Hughes' use of nature overlaps with John Donne, it is first necessary to look at the two different sides of the Harlem Renaissance. The two labels for the movement, The Harlem Renaissance and The New Negro point to differing characteristics of the movement: cultural and political. The term "Harlem Renaissance" refers to the cultural, artistic, and musical characteristics of the movement. "The New Negro" is a reference to the political and ideological struggle that produced this cultural outpouring. The term is also a direct reference to Alain Locke's own movement defining essay, "The New Negro." "The greatest struggle to emerge from the New Negro Movement; how to effect a black aesthetic within an

¹ Wintz, Cary D. 1996. The Harlem Renaissance, 1920-1940. New York: Garland Pub.

environment largely monitored and controlled by whites.”² Harlem was one of the first times in American history that a large number of black artists (writers, musicians, dancers, instrumentalists, painters, etc.) lived in such close proximity to one another, and had the financial and geographic opportunities that New York City could offer. The Harlem Renaissance was not only a time that saw an increase in black artists, but also a movement that sought to redefine the image of the black community. This movement would send ripple affects across the world leading to The Negritude Movement and later the Black Arts Movement.

Langston Hughes is often cited as one of the most popular male Harlem Renaissance writers. The majority of Hughes’ large collection of works were written and published past the end of the Harlem Renaissance, which declined and eventually ended after the financial devastation that occurred after the Stock Market Crash in 1929, but all of his writing shows the influence of this artistic movement. In his famous two-volume biography, Arnold Rampersad pays special attention to the political, social, and economic shifts that influenced his writing and politics. The first volume paid specific attention to the family dynamics that shaped Hughes’ writing and politics.

In *The New Red Negro* (1999), James Edward Smethurst examines the poetic techniques in Hughes’ poetry. Specifically, his argument focuses on narratorial voice. “The poetic voice that Hughes creates...is not that of the individual narratorial consciousness, but of a simultaneously unitary and multiple urban community.”³ In contrast to Smethurst’s approach of looking at the aesthetic and structural aspects of Hughes’ works, the majority of scholars approach research on Langston Hughes through the perspective of race, focusing on themes such as racial identification, power-dynamics and politics. Mike Chaser continued with this theme and

² Nielson, Erik. 2012. "A “High Tension” in Langston Hughes’s Musical Verse". MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S. 37 (4),165

³ Smethurst, James Edward. 1999., 1930-1946. New York: Oxford University Press,94.

demonstrated that writers within the Harlem Renaissance understood how a black laugh could go where the physical black body in many cases couldn't. The power of the black laugh allowed Langston Hughes and other African American writers to fight against white control of public space while also setting the field for further political action.⁴

Just as Langston Hughes was active within an artistic movement that had different motives and inspirations, John Donne also wrote during a controversial time. The English Renaissance was a period that saw a spurge in European artistic inspiration and increased literacy and social improvements. Yet, during the same time when English writers were turning back to the Classics and to Greek writers, the Reformation was also in full affect. The same Tudor dynasty that brought poets and musicians from across the world to England, also initiated bloody religious wars. After King Henry VIII.'s break from the Catholic Church and the following tension between Protestants and Catholics, many English citizens were left in turmoil over the "right" religion to get to heaven. As a poet, John Donne is representative of the Reformatory time period. Scholars have placed him within a small group of English Renaissance writers called metaphysic.

Before Herbert Grierson published his 1921 collection, *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century-Donne to Butler*, there was insufficient scholarship regarding Donne, or any of the other metaphysical poets. As one of the first voices in the conversation, he held that Donne was a metaphysical poet due to his deep reflective interest in the experience and the new psychological curiosity with which he writes of love and religion. "Metaphysical poetry, in the full sense of the term, is a poetry which...has been inspired by a philosophical conception of the

⁴ Chasar, M. 2008. "The Sounds of Black Laughter and the Harlem Renaissance: Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes". *American Literature*. 80 (1), 58.

universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence.”⁵ The denotative and social meaning of this categorization has permanently affected the scholarly conversation surrounding Donne as he has since always been referred to as being metaphysical.

In 1967 Helen Gardner published a collection of poems from authors she considered to be metaphysical. She utilizes a historical logic to prove that in the 18th century, Samuel Johnson was the first person to identify a group of 17th century poets as being metaphysical and he did so “with the consciousness that it was a piece of literary slang... he did not consider that these poets had the right to be called ‘metaphysical’ in the true sense.” Gardner’s research shows how the naming of “metaphysical poetry” was originally a term of disapprobation, and how only much later did it become a term of respect for the writer’s ingenuity.⁶ Despite a few scholars’ investigations around Donne’s secular poetry, most of the research focuses on his religious works in connection to The Reformation. In *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace*, Brian Cummings, a prominent English Reformation scholar, explores “how a reformation in religion relates to another reformation in language and in texts placing the Reformation within the early modern culture of writing”.⁷ Not surprisingly, John Donne became a key figure in his research, and Cummings argues “Donne longed for a language free of resistance, but his own poetry and prose abound in them...this becomes apparent when diction and metaphor is put aside for a while in order to reveal in relief the linguistic structure of Donne’s religious poems.”⁸

Throughout literary history, poets have evoked the spirit of nature in epics, ballads, sonnets, pastorals, free verse and poetic and prose forms. As human society progressed from

⁵ Grierson, Herbert John Clifford. 1979. *Metaphysical lyrics & poems of the seventeenth century: Donne to Butler*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, xii.

⁶ Gardner, Helen. 1967. *The metaphysical poets*. London: Oxford U.P.

⁷ Cummings, Brian. 2002. *The literary culture of the Reformation: grammar and grace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 18.

⁸ Cummings, Brian. 2002. *The literary culture of the Reformation: grammar and grace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 397.

focus on rural life to large populations concentrated in cities still the image of nature, and the romantic pull towards its beauty and purity remained. Belief in the purity of nature has led to its elevation of the concept of nature in language. It is not coincidental that the image of the “log-cabin living, ranch owning, and country-bred man” has gotten countless American men elected to the presidency. As with the idea of nature being pure, the closer a man, or woman, is associated with nature, the better political candidate, citizen, lover, worker, etc. he or she is then considered to be.

Looking closely at the role of nature in English literature there are two trends recognized by scholars: the classical use of Nature, which was seen as being aesthetic and often unrealistic, and the later Naturalism movement that sprung up during the years of Wordsworth and his contemporaries. This change has been noted by numerous scholars and in his 1964 book, *Naturalism in English Poetry*, Stopford A. Brooke argues this change was “a reaction which, caused by a weariness of artificial and conventional poetry, went back, in order to draw new life into poetry, to simple human nature, and to nature herself as seen in her world and uncultivated beauty...is what is meant by the rise of naturalism.”⁹ Brooke notes that this change has been slowly approaching for generations, however it managed to completely shift in the 60 years between Pope and Wordsworth. In the classical age of poetry, “nature is counted of value chiefly as a storehouse of similitudes illustrative of human actions and passions.”¹⁰ Poetry from this period often depicts the emotional wants of the speaker as being mirrored and expressed through nature in ways that set tones of longing and desire without the speaker having to attach these emotions directly to himself.

⁹ Brooke, Stopford Augustus. 1964. *Naturalism in English poetry*. Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1.

¹⁰ Reynolds, Myra. 1966. *The treatment of nature in English poetry between Pope and Wordsworth*. New York: Gordian Press,

To contrast this classical approach was the rise of the Naturalism movement, a literary move towards “natural” representations of nature. Cowper was a leading figure in the Naturalism movement helped trigger the shift in metaphors associated with nature. He returned to simplistic countryside images of nature in his own poetry, turning from the flashy use of nature prominent the century before. Tracing the use of images of nature across English literature in England and its later presence in the United States, it is clear that despite cultural and time differences there is a purifying power in images of nature. Nature is a tool for poets; one that when correctly welded has influenced politics and society. John Donne and Langston Hughes both use metaphor in an equation-like. First, nature’s beauty and purity is idealized and then people are associated with this perfect image. In order to closely see this process, the two metaphors have been separated in this paper with a different poem from the writer as an example.

In the large collection of John Donne’s works there is a group of poems considered to be “romantic verse” or “secular verse.” These love poems are separated from his later *Holy Sonnets*, and are characterized by a speaker who directly addresses his mistress and or romantic interests. This secular collection contrasts Donne’s later religious poetry and sermons written after he entered the ministry. All of these romantic poems are tools of persuasion, as the speaker seeks possession and conquest of the women in which he addresses. Though in many instances the speaker’s ultimate goal is to get the woman addressed to sleep with him, he attempts to separate the thought of lust and the connotation to shame and sin away from the idea of love. It is important to recognize that Donne wrote and circulated these works in manuscript form during a time of great religious fervor within the court. The finding of these poems would have ostracized him from court, a society that knew very well that many men strayed from their marriage beds, but had never dared to promote the idea of married women during the same. In order to break

away from these negative connotations, the speaker seeks not to turn away from carnal love, but instead to validate and purify it through association to nature.

The Bait
Come live with me, and be my love,
And we will some new pleasures prove
Of golden sands, and crystal brooks,
With silken lines, and silver hooks. (1-4)¹¹

This quartet is the opening stanza of “The Bait.” The first two lines are a direct reference to Christopher Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” (1599). “Come Live with me and be my love, / And we will all the pleasures prove/ that valleys, groves, hills, and fields, / woods, or steepy mountains yield.”¹² By alluding to an older tradition of romantic verse that was well known within English court language, Donne attempts to ground the poem and the later startling lines. Lederer argues, “<Donne’s> innovations of style were the result of a conscious effort. He was anxious to part company with the accepted contemporary fashion.”¹³ Donne directly quotes Marlowe and brings to the reader’s attention the older pastoral form of love, only to then spend the rest of the poem breaking and bending this traditional form to also include carnal love.

From the first lines of the poem, the idea of carnal love is expressed through the speaker’s direct request for the woman addressed to come live with him. The word “pleasure” is a direct signal of the image of carnal love that Donne seeks to validate. When the reader sees “pleasure” their schematic processing immediately thinks “sexual” pleasure, but the pleasure is not of sex, but of “golden sands, and crystal brooks” (1-3). This comparison directly taps into the

¹¹ Donne, John. *The complete English poems*. Edited by Albert J. Smith. Penguin Books, 1973.

¹² Greenblatt, Stephen, and Meyer Howard Abrams, eds. *The Norton anthology of English literature*. WW Norton & Company, 2012.

¹³ Lederer, Josef. 1946. "John Donne and the Emblematic Practice". *The Review of English Studies*. os-XXII (87), 184.

conceptual metaphor that NATURE IS PURE. It is not just sand that is evoked, but “golden sand”. The connotation of the word “golden” due to Christian influence on the English language directly connects to images of purity, royalty, goodness, and other positive images. Yet the poem doesn’t stop with just golden sands, but adds crystal brooks, which is another sublime and perfect image. Those in opposition to the idea of sex between the speaker and the woman addressed can argue against the concept of carnal love, but they cannot straightforwardly oppose the image of nature. Who could find anything ugly, sinful, or unnatural in the thought of sands and rivers, two of the most basic and essential factors of our world?

The first stanza in “The Bait” unites the impure idea of carnal love to the purity of nature. The NATURE IS PURE metaphor is critical in the analysis of the poem because line-by-line Donne seeks to set the woman he lusts above nature. Nature is shown as a surreal and pure element, yet the woman is even purer. The rivers that have crystal brooks are “warmed by thy eyes” (6) and “ if tho, to be so seen, be’st loth, /by sun or moon, thou dark’nest both” (13-14). These lines don’t just serve as compliments, but also as justification for the carnal love that the speaker feels. Once again, this argument is set in a manner that is difficult to oppose because if “each fish.../will amorously to thee swim” (10-11) and even the rivers are warmed by sight of her, how could the speaker be expected to not also want her. In this way the speaker transposes his own desires onto nature, and depicts his own actions through the way nature is affected by the woman’s presence. While Donne’s argument may seem sensible and even humorous to modern readers, his treatment of love was entirely unconventional and improper for his original audience.

More than 300 years after “The Bait” was circulated among the London court, a young African American man returned to New York after a visit to his father in Mexico, and began to

gather a collection of poems, that would include some of his most famous pieces. This writer was Langston Hughes and though the world was not yet aware, New York, specifically Harlem, was being transformed as black artists moved from all across the U.S to its bustling vibrant streets. Hughes was born into a family who had already been active in racial movements. One of Hughes' grandfathers was killed participating in the rebellion of Harpers Ferry, and another fought post-slavery racism and married interracially. His ancestors "demanded, from the moment his elders recognized the boy's unusual intelligence and began to talk to him about Duty and The Race, that he had a messianic obligation to the Afro-American people, and through them to America."¹⁴ In his poetry readers can see how Hughes' advocated for racial equality, and own personal search for racial identification and placement within American society. Langston Hughes would search in the streets of New York, in the landscape of Africa and the rural U.S, and later in dreams of a more equal reality.

In Langston Hughes' first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926), Hughes published "Dreams" and "Dream Variations" the first of his dream-themed poems. These two poems alongside "A Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Harlem" (1951) are a few of his most well known works.

Dreams
Hold onto dreams
For if dreams die
Life is like a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

¹⁴ Rampersad, Arnold. 1986. *The life of Langston Hughes*. New York: Oxford University Press, 4.

Like Donne's poem, "The Bait," "Dreams" also demonstrates the metaphor NATURE IS PURE, but here the metaphor is shown through its reversal; an image of an alternative-like reality in which nature is damaged. Baxter Miller also recognized the importance of nature in Hughes' poetry, and claimed that "To Hughes, the imagination reconciled and identified man with nature, the subjective with the objective, the internal mind with the external world."¹⁵ This outlook on nature explains why Hughes, a city poet, often returns to scenes and images of nature in order to fight larger issues of segregation and poverty. Images of nature are shown as being impure from the very beginning of the poem through the use of the "broken wing bird/ that cannot fly" (2-3). The reversal of nature in the image of hurt bird is a strategic use of diction as "bird" works on two levels. The definition of a bird refers to its wings and biological ability to fly. This ability has often been praised, envied, and/or sought after by human spectators leading to the creation of aircrafts. In regards to connotation, the schematic idea of a bird connects to ideographs such as "Freedom", "Far-sightedness", "Beauty", etc.

When a bird has broken wings not only is it then biologically unable to fly, but also it figuratively signifies a loss of freedom and/or beauty, and implies vulnerability. This poem is left open for many interpretations depending on what the reader imagines the dream to be. Due to the historical and social context it is clear that the dream is one racial equality, however whether it is a dream for racial equality, career success, athletic prowess, etc. it is fully supported by the voice of the speaker who only requests that the reader keeps that dream alive. For this reason, this poem has survived the test of time and even as the political winds in the U.S shift, the dream still remains.

¹⁵ Miller, R. Baxter. 1989. The art and imagination of Langston Hughes, 2.

Structurally, the first metaphor that compares a world without dreams to a broken winged-bird is a simile. The use of “like”(3) directly forces this comparison to the readers mind and there is a sense of imbalance between the two images that only the use of “like”(3) can solve. In contrast to the use of simile in the first stanza of “Dreams,” the metaphor in stanza. The lack of “like” in this stanza plays into the increasing intensity of the poem, as in the first stanza the “like” directly alludes to the falsity of this reality, yet in the second stanza the lone “is”(7) sets this unnatural and therefore impure reality as being real. This structural pattern intensifies the subtle change between the words “die”(2) and “go”(6). “Though [Langston Hughes] was a social and political rebel, he was an early deconstructionist as well, he subverted the very conventions of genre through which tradition and modernity have sought to confine the free imagination.”¹⁶ As the poem works as a warning, there is a subtle threat-like tone to the speaker’s voice that is exemplified in the “die”(2) and “go”(6), the two verbs that are negative in the speaker’s eyes. These are the causes of the then unnatural and impure images of the broken-winged bird and barren field.

Compared to the more complex syntax and heavy use of figurative language that is prominent in Donne’s poetry, Hughes’ writing may seem simplistic. It is necessary to note that Hughes’s use of the vernacular was a strategic move, as not only was he attempting to talk about the African-American community, but also he wanted the narratorial voice to sound like the community they represented. “Hughes synthesized a wide variety of ‘high’ and ‘popular’ African-American discourses and styles from Reconstruction to contemporary Vaudeville to create a genre of protest poetry that successfully appealed to a Southern African American

¹⁶ Miller, R. Baxter. 1989. *The Art and imagination of Langston Hughes*, 5.

audience.”¹⁷ The brevity of “Dreams” enables each word within the poem to carry a heavy weight, and this enables the serious tone throughout the work.

Once Donne and Hughes show the beauty and purity of nature they then connect that same pure image to humanity. “In a metaphysical poem the conceits are instruments of definition in an argument or instruments to persuade.”¹⁸ In African American poetry, specifically in Langston Hughes’s poetry, metaphor is a tool of persuasion. The images chosen were not done so accidentally by the writers, but were picked based on their connotative as well as denotative meaning within language and their communities.

The Primrose

Should she
Be more than woman, she would get above
All thought of sex, and think to move
My heart to study her, and not to love.
...
Live, primrose, then, and thrive
With thy true number five;
And woman, whom this flower doth represent
With this mysterious number be content;
(Donne 14-17, 21-24)³

Dream Variations

To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun,
To whirl and to 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!
(Hughes 1-10)⁶

In “The Primrose,” the Primrose becomes the central image of nature “live, primrose

¹⁷ Smethurst, James Edward. 1999. *The new red Negro: the literary left and African American poetry, 1930-1946*. New York: Oxford University Press, 97.

¹⁸ Gardner, Helen. 1967. *The metaphysical poets*. London: Oxford U.P, xxvi

then, and thrive”(21). The conceit in the poem allows the Primrose to be representative of a woman. This metaphor is not definitely clarified until the end of the poem when the speaker says “and woman, whom this flower doth represent” (21), which causes a complete reversal of the readers understanding of the poem. Once the reader sees that the beautiful Primrose that is evoked in the poem is representative of the woman, then the reality within the poem is shifted, and the woman becomes possessed of all the pure connotations of the Primrose. In regards to the complex metaphoric structure, it is important to recognize that there is a difference between the reality within and outside of the poem. Within the poem, the woman is a primrose and is therefore pure, which purifies the carnal love that the speaker feels for her. In the reality outside the poem, it is clear that the woman can never be a rose, and therefore cannot be as pure as the speaker makes her out to be. This contrast is brought directly to the light through lines 14-17 in which the speaker sets up a “if...then” like structure. The argument surrounding the falsity of the metaphor is that if the woman was indeed a primrose then he would not have carnal love or lust for her, but would instead just want to study her. However, since the reader knows that the woman is human these lines imply and validate the speaker’s carnal love, as it only seems “natural” in light of the circumstances of her humanity.

Looking at Donne’s piece “Dream Variations” it is immediately clear that this poem shares many thematic similarities with “Dreams” examined earlier in this paper. The excerpt included is only the first stanza of the two-stanza Décima poem. This first stanza refers specifically to one dream whereby the speaker’s voice is of a plurastic consciousness, and he speaks for an entire community of Dreamers. Images are represented in the simile that connects darkness of night to the speaker’s skin. The idea of darkness is often connotatively connected to negative concepts such as dirtiness, crime, fear, lack of sight, etc. This is the connotation that is also played

out in racist constructions, whereby the lighter the skin the more accepted in society a person is. Hughes seeks to oppose this ideal by purifying darkness, and then connect the purified darkness to the speaker in the poem. The night is described as coming on “gently”(7). The verb “gently” is the purifying agent as it softens the darkness and creates a calm tone in the poem. By associating the gentleness of the dark to the color of the speaker’s skin, Hughes thereby associates the man to gentleness. This is a strategy that connects to the ideal of the “New Negro” as African-Americans fought to reinvent themselves in the eyes of a society which negatively stereotyped them as ignorant, violent, and childlike. From the beginning of “Dream Variations” all of the speakers actions and longings are connected to nature. The speaker wants to fling his arms in the sun and sit and rest under trees, and there is a sense of bliss that the speaker seeks and would possibly find in the natural setting if his dream were to come true.

Both the Harlem Renaissance converged together a diverse range of writers. Differences in race, religion, class, and sexuality permeated into the works leaving a rich trail of literature. Despite blatant differences in the Harlem Renaissance and the English Renaissance, both artistic periods have been similarly labeled. The search for these similarities has discovered that imagery of nature metaphorically connected to humans can help socially validate ostracized groups. The concept of “naturalism” can extend beyond the direct image of nature, and purify social constructs as well. John Donne and Langston Hughes did not use nature accidentally in their poetry, both writers were fully aware of the power of metaphor.

For further research, the use of metaphor associated with nature should be applied more extensively to a wider range of Harlem Renaissance and metaphysic writers in search for more patterns.

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