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Identity Through Poetry: Structure and Allusions

Despite one’s identity and beliefs, the same methods can be used to show these through poetry. “Yet Do I Marvel” is a poem written by Countee Cullen in 1925. Countee Cullen was an African American poet who received a formal education derived from almost completely Caucasian influences; he would later go on to complete his masters at Harvard. Cullen, who experienced success in both black and white cultures, reached the peak of his popularity during the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance took place during the 1920s and was a period of resurgence for African American arts. “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is a poem written by Langston Hughes in 1921. Langston Hughes was also an African American poet and largely considered a leader of the Harlem Renaissance. Raised by his grandmother in Kansas, Hughes was instilled with a sense of racial pride from a young age. **Both authors use allusion, a poetic device, to deepen their poem’s meaning and strengthen the purpose. In “Yet Do I Marvel,” Cullen uses religious and mythological allusions to further illustrate his intent and the theme of questioning God’s actions. However, in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Hughes uses allusions by referring to different rivers with great importance in African American history. The structure these authors use also shows their identity and its impact on their poetry. Cullen follows strict English conventions, commonly used by white people during that period, which reinforces his formal education with majorly white influences and his intent to blend in with white people in order to hold a peace between both communities. On the contrary, Hughes poem is in lyrical free verse with heavy jazz influences, a music genre special to African Americans during that time—his use of this structure, as well as his tendency to break the rules in his poetry, further prove the way his identity as a proud African American influences his poetry. Regardless, both authors are undeniable masters at showing identity through their poetry using poetic devices and structure.**

Both authors use allusion, the poetic device, in order to enhance the meaning of their poems and increase the reader’s understanding. Although possibly difficult to understand at first for the average reader, the allusions Cullen uses in “Marvel” add a new layer of depth to his poem—one may recognize this after doing a bit of research. Cullen specifically uses religious and mythological allusions to portray his questioning of God’s actions in his poem and the theme of religion. As evidence in the first line of the poem, “I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind,” (Cullen). Cullen signifies the topic of religion and sets up the question in his poem from the beginning. Another allusion in the poem is in lines five and six: “Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus / Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare,” (Cullen). **Tantalus was a Greek mythological figure who betrayed Zeus, and, consequently, was eternally punished by being made to stand in a pool of water with low-hanging fruit branches hanging in front of him**. Whenever he reached down to get a drink, the water would recede, and the fruit branches were just out of his grasp. The purpose of this allusion is to compare Tantalus, eternally tempted by his desires, to humans who face the same struggle. Through this allusion, Cullen questions why God is always tempting humans. Similarly, Hughes uses allusions in “Rivers” to enhance meaning. Hughes alludes to different rivers, each an important part of African American history; this includes the Euphrates, Congo, Nile, and the Mississippi. Although it may add to the reader’s confusion at first, once one understands the relevance of these rivers to African American history, Hughes’s reason for including them becomes apparent. For instance, in line five Hughes writes, “I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.” **The Euphrates is the longest river in Western Asia and holds great historical importance; additionally, this river aided in the growth of some of the first civilizations.** Hughes includes this allusion in order to reinforce the fact that African Americans have existed since the beginning of time. Overall, the allusions in “Rivers” enhance the meaning of the poem, and also allow the reader to gain a deeper understanding of what Hughes is trying to express. Both “Marvel” and “Rivers” contain allusions that enhance meaning as well as allow the readers to gain a deeper understanding of the poems.

In both “Marvel” and “Rivers,” the author’s identity is revealed through the structure used. “Marvel,” is a sonnet that follows a rhyme scheme, while “Rivers” is a lyrical free verse with jazz influences. In his poem, Cullen follows strict English conventions, most commonly used by white people. This is an accurate reflection of Cullen’s formal. Additionally, this is also a strong indicator of Cullen’s goal to blend in with Caucasians and close the gap between the two communities. Cullen wants to make it known that African Americans can also follow poetry structure commonly used by white people. Conversely, Hughes breaks the rules in his poem and fails to conform to strict English conventions used by Caucasians. In fact, Hughes’s poem has strong jazz influences—an African American music genre at the time—which is evident in the euphonic nature of the poem. Hughes was proud of his identity as an African American, and it is evident in his poem structure. Overall, Cullen’s use of strict English conventions in his poem is evident of his formal teachings with white influences and belief that African Americans should attempt to blend in with white people. On the contrary, Hughes’s lack of strict conventions and jazz influences in his poem is a strong reflection of his pride as an African American.

In conclusion, the use of structure in both poems shows the author’s identity. The structure of Cullen’s poem, “Marvel” follows strict English conventions. His use of this rigid structure reinforces his identity as someone who received a formal education and his intent to blend in with white people. On the contrary, Hughes poem, “Rivers,” is a lyrical free verse with heavy jazz influences. His use of this structure, as well as his tendency to break the rules in his poetry, further prove the way his identity as a proud African American influences his poetry. Both authors also use allusion, a poetic device, to create depth in the meaning of their poems and strengthens purpose. Regardless, both authors are undeniable masters at showing identity through their poetry using poetic devices and structure. Cullen uses allusions to signify his topic at the beginning of his poem as well as to signify his theme of questioning God with mythological allusions later in his poem; whereas, Hughes uses allusions to different rivers with historical significance to African Americans specifically to illustrate the meaning of his poem. Cullen also follows a much stricter poem structure and English conventions. On the other hand, Hughes’s poem, a lyrical free verse, lacks structure. Both author’s structures accurately represent their contrasting identities and beliefs. These two authors identities undeniably shine through their poems with their use of structure and allusions—this is indisputable evidence that identity plays a large role in every aspect of poetry.

Works Cited

Cullen, Countee. “Yet Do I Marvel.” *Color*, Harper and Lee, 1925.

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