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Reflecting Identity: Revealed Through the Use of Allusions, Structure, and Tone

A person’s expression through art is one of the best ways to demonstrate their identity. The Harlem Renaissance was from the 1910s to around the mid-1930s and was considered the golden age of African-American culture where literature, music, and art began to thrive. Harlem is a neighborhood in the northern area of Manhattan where many African-Americans lived, including the poets Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is a poem written in 1920 by Langston Hughes, who stood out as an African-American poet in the Harlem Renaissance because he focused on the lives of African-Americans. Langston Hughes was one of the first people to reveal the beauty of his culture, and he used inspiration from the jazz clubs from Harlem to incorporate into his poetry. “Yet Do I Marvel” is a poem written in 1925 by Countee Cullen, who was successful in both black and white culture, and he believed that art could shorten the distance between the two cultures. Countee Cullen’s formal education was from mostly white influences, and he felt challenged to prove that an African-American poet can succeed in the white culture by writing about topics that can be relatable to everyone. **“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Langston Hughes and *“*Yet Do I Marvel” by Countee Cullen** **both show the author's identity through their poetry by the use of structure, allusions, and tone. Similarly, both of the authors use allusions to help strengthen the message of the poems. In *“*The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Hughes uses allusions to help show the history of his culture that is connected by the rivers of their past. At the same time, Cullen uses allusions to make the poem’s message stronger and to show that he can write like European poets. However, Hughes writes “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” as a lyrical free verse with a tone that shows how proud he is of his culture. Meanwhile, Countee Cullen writes “Yet Do I Marvel” as a sonnet with a skeptical tone to show his educational background that had strong white influences, and to show that he can relate to Europeans. Ultimately, *“*The Negro Speaks of Rivers” best reflects the identity of African Americans because Langston Hughes reveals the pride that he has for the history of his culture using the structure, allusions, and tone of his poem.**

In both poems, the authors use multiple allusions to help strengthen the message and imagery of the poems. Hughes uses allusions referring to rivers that tell the African-American history. Hughes writes, “I bathed in the Euphrates when the dawns were young.” (line 5) to portray African-Americans as the first civilization. As Hughes writes the poem, he continues to refer to more rivers such as the Congo and the Nile; therefore, talking about the first African-Americans that are taken from their homes and forced into slavery by the slave traders. However, Hughes then writes about how they celebrated their freedom at the Mississippi river when “Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans” and freed them, (Hughes line 8). The allusions of rivers in “Rivers” symbolizes African-American’s path through history since the beginning of time, as they move towards a better future with equality. On the other hand, Cullen uses the biblical allusion of God, while using the allusions from Greek mythology to give historical context. The allusion of Tantalus is mentioned in the poem because he was punished by Zeus to forever go hungry and thirsty. Tantalus was condemned to the underworld where he stood in a pool of water and had fruit hanging above him, but he could never reach. Cullen uses this in his poem because it enforces the question of why God created humans but lets them go hungry and thirsty with constant temptation surrounding them. The other allusion in the poem “Marvel” is of Sisyphus: “If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus/to struggle up a never-ending stair,” (Cullen line 7-8). **Sisyphus was the King of Corinth, but he betrayed Zeus by cheating death twice; therefore, he was punished to forever push a boulder up a hill in the underworld**. The use of Sisyphus in the poem asks why God created humans, only to make them struggle as they go through life. Both authors used these allusions to strengthen their poetry by bringing in topics that can help people relate to the subject.

Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen show their identity through structure and tone; however, both authors have very different writing styles and attitudes towards the topic of their poems. Hughes writes “Rivers” as a lyrical free verse, and he chose to do this because he loved to incorporate the jazz music element from the clubs of Harlem into his poetry, which is more improvised and does not have a specific structure that has to be followed. The tone that Hughes uses in this poem demonstrates how proud and passionate he is of African-Americans history. **Cullen, however, wrote** **“Marvel” as a sonnet with a skeptical tone towards God**. Choosing to write the poem as a sonnet reflects Cullen’s educational background, because his formal education was mostly from white influences. During the time of the Harlem Renaissance, traditional white poetry was structured and had specific rules that had to be followed. Writing this poem as a sonnet is Countee Cullen’s way of proving that even though he is African-American, he could still compete with the European poets.

In conclusion, both Hughes and Cullen show their identity using allusions to help give make the message of their poems stronger. Hughes uses allusions to reveal some history of his culture by connecting it with rivers, while Cullen uses the allusions to make the message of the poem stronger and to prove that he can blend in with Caucasian poets. However, Hughes writes his poem as a lyrical free verse with a tone showing how proud he is of his culture. Meanwhile, Cullen wrote “Marvel” as a sonnet with a skeptical tone that portrays his white educational background, and his need to fit in. Ultimately, *“*The Negro Speaks of Rivers” best reflects the identity of African Americans because Langston Hughes reveals the pride that he has for the history of his culture using the structure, allusions, and tone of his poem. In both poems, the authors use allusions to help strengthen the message and imagery of the poems. On the other hand, the author’s way of using structure and tone reveal different identities, even though both authors grew up in the same area. Regardless of the different identities shown in the poems, both poems show parts of the author’s identity that people can relate to. Hughes stood out as an African-American poet that showed the beauty of his own culture, whereas Cullen is successful in both white and black cultures, but he preferred to blend in rather than stand out.

Work Cited

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

Hughes, Langston. “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, Harold Ober Associates, 2002.