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Controversial Saving

“Salvation” by Langston Hughes is a piece from autobiographical memoir. In this chapter young Langston is going to a revival and anticipates meeting Jesus. The main scene takes place at the church which his aunt goes to. From his conversations with the aunt, he gets an impression that he will see a light and will be “saved” because Jesus will come into his life. The sensation the adults cause about Jesus does make Langston believe he will literally meet him at the revival. When the big day comes, the author goes through a transformative experience in which both his faith in Jesus and his morals are challenged.

At the start of the narration, the author is full of faith and wholeheartedly believes he will get to see Jesus at the ceremony. As a child, he doesn’t understand the subtleties and takes his aunt’s promises literally. “My aunt told me that when you were saved you saw a light, and something happened to you inside! And Jesus came into your life! And God was with you from then on!” (Hughes) So the narrator is calmly waiting to be saved. But as the time passes and most kids get up and get “saved,” the author’s belief that Jesus is coming to save him is starting to crumble. The climax happens when the last boy Westley, who is still waiting with Langston, gets tired of sitting there and decides to get up and “be saved.” Now the author is left all alone on the bench and his aunt is crying while the whole church is praying for him. But because the author is convinced that he is supposed to meet Jesus to be saved, he continues to wait. “And I kept waiting serenely for Jesus, waiting, waiting – but he didn’t come. I wanted to see him, but nothing

happened to me. Nothing! I wanted something to happen to me, but nothing happened” (Hughes). At this point, young Langston feels ashamed for holding up everyone for so long, and he makes a painful decision to go up and be saved. The sensation the adults have caused about Jesus results in Langston’s loss of faith and a reason for crying after a sobering realization he keeps to himself in a guilt-ridden state.

Ironically the very same ceremony that was supposed to “bring the author into the fold “makes him lose faith. When Jesus failed to appear, young Langston is facing a choice to keep waiting or to lie and “be saved” the way his friend Westley did. The author is feeling ashamed for holding everyone up and in order to “save further trouble” he decides to lie. “I began to wonder what God thought about Westley, God had not struck Westley dead for taking his name in vain or for lying in the temple” (Hughes). In observing his friend’s hypocritical behavior, the author is seeing no consequences. God doesn’t punish Westley for lying, so he proceeds to join him at the altar. “Suddenly the whole room broke into a sea of shouting, as they saw me rise. Waves of rejoicing swept the place. Women leaped in the air. My aunt threw her arms around me. The minister took me by the hand and led me to the platform” (Hughes.) The reaction of the adults just further confirms his epiphany that the society expects him to conform and act in a certain way even if it goes against his morals. This is where Langston’s search for personal truth and growth outside of the environment he was born into begins. In his review on “Religion in the Life of Langston Hughes,” Arnold Rampersad states, “This disillusionment with religion was the foundation of Hughes’s receptivity to the blues even as he remained deeply respectful of black people, such as his loving ‘aunt’, who were religious. For most of his life, indeed, Hughes was probably the most dogged opponent of religion among major black writers even as his art sometimes embraced religious forms” (13).

Later, when Langston is being heard crying at night after the ceremony, he can't bring himself to confess to his aunt that he is crying not because he has found faith but because he has lost it. He is shaken by the experience and ashamed of lying. This event marks Langston's coming of age and coming to terms with his loss of faith and isolation from his upbringing. Being only a twelve-year-old boy just going on thirteen, he sees life with a childlike naivete and believes in the infallibility of adults, which changes forever after this experience. Now Langston gets a new perspective as a young teen, searching for his identity and values. He doesn't get what he expects from the adults in the end, only a very real misguided sense of guilt, ironically caused by the same adults he has believed in. As per Rampersad's review of Hughes's life," Growing up with a sense of personal abandonment, he experienced God as a power that promised much but delivered little or nothing. Hughes's script for his own funeral, which explicitly excluded religion, reflected his bitterness on the subject and his rival belief in the redemptive power of values rooted in the black world" (7).

Lastly, Langston's experience shows life is not as literal as children perceive it. Not seeing Jesus is maybe a blessing in disguise. Although not right then and there, as this realization is devastating for young Langston, this marks a departure from the people who deceived him and a search for truth. It would be much easier and comforting if he was saved by Jesus along with everyone else who claimed they had.

Works Cited Page

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