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### The Loneliness of Religion

Centuries-old religions like Christianity and Judaism emphasize the omnipotent nature of God and the innate dependence people have towards him. Author Langston Hughes wouldn't be a good fit in this atmosphere as many of his works emphasize the loneliness of religion and the lack of hope that silently crowds the church pews. In Langston Hughes's short story "Salvation" and his poem "God," we see a vivid theme of isolation and disdain that Hughes has towards religion. From childhood trauma with Aunt Reed in "Salvation" to an alone and distant deity in "God," Hughes wrote contemptibly about the isolation of God from the human experience.

Found in the BMCC Literature Resource Center, Arnold Rampersad's literary review of "Religion in the life of Langston Hughes" examines Langston Hughes's hostility to religion and its role throughout his life as seen through his literary works. Using memoir accounts, Rampersad points out that Hughes had an appreciation for the role of religion in African American life, but as he familiarized himself with black culture and socialist radicalism his skepticism for religion grew. Rampersad further explains that Langston Hughes skepticism towards religion is rooted in the emergence of black artistry, blues, and secular work of the early 20th century by writers/artists like Duke Ellington W.E.B Du Bois which shifted Hughes faith onto the "humanity, creativity, and resilience of black people" (16). Rampersad describes Langston Hughes's appreciation of secular ideas over religion through literary works throughout

his career like “Goodbye Christ” and “Salvation” which he describes as a “gut opposition to religion” (6). Rampersad examines Langston Hughes poem “The Weary Blues” as one of the works that established Langston as a secular writer stating, “By 1925, when Hughes launched the main phase of his career with his poem *The Weary Blues*”, he declared his loyalty to this secular-to-the-bone mode, even as he appreciated the heritage of black Christianity. Hostile reviews of his blue poem, especially those in “*Fine Clothes to the Jew*” (1927), reminded him of the risk-taking in trying to build his career on nonreligious, and perhaps even antireligion form” (6) Showing the foundation of Hughes stance on religion. Hughes was not a religious man, but his works often revolve around it. Hughes saw the duality of religion: on one side being a testament to the beauty of humanity and a source of strength while also being a tool to justify oppression and greed. Rampersad perfectly summarizes this by saying, “Despite such work, however, I would argue that Hughes has no deep belief in religion - organized, unorganized, or disorganized. The evidence strongly suggests that Hughes went to his death with a virtual disdain for religion” (16).

Throughout “Salvation” and “God,” Hughes emphasizes the disconnect between people and God through a young boy’s disappointing experience and a poetic depiction of a lonely God. In “Salvation,” Hughes recounts waiting for Jesus to come to him, at a church revival he attends with his aunt. After being told by elders that he’d see Jesus via bright lights and be saved and believing them in a literal sense, he waits excitedly to finally connect with Jesus. The narrator writes “The whole congregation prayed for me alone, in a mighty wail of moans and voices. And I keep 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.”

("Salvation"). Hughes illustrates the lack of connection he feels towards religion at this moment despite his trying to be helped by the prayers of those around him.

In the poem "God," Hughes furthers this idea between people and God taking in the voice of God says "...Without one friend, (2) Alone in my purity, (3) World without end" (4). This depicts the isolating nature of God and God's inability to communicate with humans. Additionally, Hughes conveys the absence of God in the overall human experience in both texts, illustrating the remote and unhelpful nature of the omnipotent being in people's lives. After no success in being saved by Jesus, Hughes begins to feel ashamed for not seeing Jesus and decides to lie, like his friend Westley about being saved in order to escape the pressure he felt "holding everything up so long" ("Salvation"). At the end of the story, the narrator writes about the disappointment he felt towards God for being a symbol of a savior, while being absent when Hughes needed him most. Hughes writes "I cried, in bed alone, and couldn't stop, I was crying because I couldn't bear to tell her that I lied, that I had deceived everybody in the church, and hadn't seen Jesus, and that now I didn't believe there was a Jesus anymore, since he didn't come to help me," ("Salvation").

The poem "God" shares this sentiment as it describes an absent God. Hughes writes in the second stanza "Below me, young lovers tread the sweet grounds - But I am God - I cannot come down," ("God") showing God's lack of involvement in human life, unable to help or interfere due to figurative his distance from people. From experience, Hughes came to believe that people are more in charge of their lives than God is. Ironically he had to save himself from the pressures put upon him by religion and elders. The resentment Hughes had towards religion stemmed from his life experience as seen in "Salvation" and many of his works. Hughes felt that

religious institutions were lucrative, he believed that people could better themselves and others more than religion could.

In conclusion, both “Salvation” and “God” explore the futility of religion in a disdainful tone towards the idea of God. Man has no literal connection to God, and God contributes nothing to human experience in the realm of Langston Hughes. As many of his works emphasize the loneliness of religion in the process, Hughes allows the strength and responsibility to reside in the characters from his stories rather than giving power to external and absent forces like God.

#### Works cited

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Rampersad, Arnold. "Religion in the Life of Langston Hughes." *Langston Hughes Review*, vol. 25, no. 1, Spring 2019, p. 6+. Gale Literature Resource Center, [https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A611023310/LitRC?u=cuny\\_mancc&sid=LitRC&xid=58eee7a5](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A611023310/LitRC?u=cuny_mancc&sid=LitRC&xid=58eee7a5). Accessed 24 Nov. 2020.

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