Comparison and Contrast Essay: Poetry Analysis

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Harlem Renaissance emerged during the period when African American culture made headlines for the first time. Routinely, the period captured all genres of art: music, literature, visual arts, etc. The name of James Mercer Langston Hughes is considered related to Harlem Renaissance, as the key-figure of African-American poetry in the first decades of the XX century (Hutchinson, 2013). If Toni Morrison is considered the queen of African-American prose, Lucille Clifton (Thelma Lucille Sayles) is unparalleled in the realm of African-American female poetry.

There are two prominent works (poems): *Dream Deferred* by L. Hughes and *It Was a Dream* by L. Clifton. The first stage in analyzing a literary text is analyzing the title; however, to deduce the meaning of both poems’ titles, one must judge by the subject. The word “dream” in both titles specifies the theme of both poems. Due to high level of synonymy, the word “dream” has a large semantic field, i.e. it is diverse in connotative and denotative meanings. In the poem by Lucille Clifton, the word “dream” implies sleep, slumber, repose, and rest among other meanings. On the other hand, in the poem by Langston Hughes, “dream” means reverie, desire, vision, etc. As far as the plane of expression is concerned, both authors use figurative language and free verse technique. Even though the authors make use of the same stylistic devices and expressive means, obviously there is absolute distinction within the planes of content of both poems. Differences within the plane of content occur due to authors’ intentions that are specific on the part of each author, and implicit information, i.e. the meanings that authors give to words. Author’s style directly depends upon such notions as expressive means, background knowledge, communicative/author’s intention, and other related concepts. Another important observation concerning analysis of a literary work is that literature on the whole is the reflection of life, the perception of scarcely perceptible: spirit of time, mood, tendencies, motion, change, etc.
It is especially true of poets and poetry. Literary work should be studied and analyzed in its inseparable connection and the context of author’s biography and time.

James Mercer Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902. After many years spent in distress, and years of knocking about the country, Hughes and his mother settled in Cleveland. Here the would-be poet graduated from high school. Later he entered Columbia University, where he joined the African-American culture, and the idea to put it on the whole new level came into his mind (“Langston Hughes”, 2007). Lucille Clifton was born in 1936 in Depew, NY. She succeeded to make respectable university career. Clifton’s later life was inseparably connected with Baltimore, Maryland (“Lucille Clifton”, 2012). Both authors, Langston Hughes and Lucille Clifton, were representatives of African-American community.

The generation of the beginning of the XX century did not experience the horrors of Civil War (1861-1865). But they were meant to live in the century of most merciless wars: World War I (1914-1918), World War II (1939-1945), Caribbean Crisis (1962), etc. Vietnam War (1959-1975) was one of most protracted military conflicts of the century and it proved that people became equal only the moment when life happened to be at stake. People cherished the dream about freedom and peace, but only when war was upon them, they realized that real freedom is in creation and kindness.

*A Dream Deferred* by Langston Hughes is a metaphoric meditation on hope and despair, anguish and longing, decay and prosperity. A dream in the poem appears in different incarnations: as something topical, urgent and mundane, as well as something universal, global, all-embracing. The final line “Or does it explode?” (Hughes, n.d.) resembles the lines from “Hollow Men”, written by Tomas Elliot: “This is the way the world ends…Not with a bang but a whimper” (Elliot, 1925). In *A Dream Deferred*, the final line functions as hyperbole (literary trope, stylistic device). In its turn, hyperbole fulfils the function of
exaggeration and keeps the reader very strained. Open ending brings no relief, prevents from catharsis, but provokes thinking. Almost in each line, there are cases of metaphorization of speech. The author applies gradation in order to awaken emotions within a reader. Figuratively, the world should blow up, so the passions, evil, violence, cruelty and pressure are demolished; thus, a man is saved. According to Joyce, the effect of enlightenment, sudden awakening is called epiphany.

Lucille Clifton’s *It Was a Dream* sounds more melodious, although the poem has no rhyme and stable rhythm. The author makes a masterly use of metaphors, “rose up before me” (Clifton, n.d.), hypophora, “what, I pleaded with her, could I do”, as well as rhetorical figures. The poem is revelation, confession to the reader, and the answer is given by “greater self” (Clifton, n.d.). The matter is: what happened to my life? Who else could make this to me but I? How could I avoid this? The answer is stylistically expressed by repetition and understatement: “This. This. This” (Clifton, n.d.). What is also important is that the first line of the poem is continuation of its title.

Disillusionment, forfeit opportunities, capabilities, pressure, passion and suppression and decadence. Both poems are allegorical and imply negative experience of those, who created them. For those, to whom these poems were written – for readers.
References


