

Patronage and the Harlem Renaissance Movement

The Case of Langston Hughes and Charlotte Mason

By Wynn Yarbrough

The Harlem Renaissance changed the shape of Afro-American arts by amplifying the voices of writers whose work would give rise to a new literary genre. Authors such as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes ignited public interest in the experiences of African Americans – an integral part of American society that had long been overlooked. Many of these authors, at the beginning of their careers, were the beneficiaries of some sort of assistance or patronage. Wealthy patrons took a particular interest in artists of such "primitive background."

Symbiotic Relationship

In the post Civil War period, many ex-slaves migrated north to live and develop African American communities there. Drawn to these people's horrific life circumstances, individuals of prominence and wealth such as Mrs. Charlotte Mason often gave monetary and emotional support to African American artists.

Langston Hughes, poet, writer, essayist, and novelist, received such assistance from Mason. The widow of a prominent physician and psychologist, she claimed a fondness for African American culture. She supported not just Hughes but Zora Neale Hurston as well. They met through Alain Locke in 1927, another Mason mentee and key figure in the Harlem Renaissance movement. At the beginning of the 1920s, Mason tried to establish the Harlem Museum of African Art. While this venture ultimately failed, her interest in seeing the survival of the history and culture of African Americans would become her life's work.

Mason's interest in Hughes evolved from her research of primitive peoples, namely the American Indians; she had previously funded writers investigating the Plains Indians. While Hughes did not refer to his American Indian ancestry in his works, he was of mixed heritage, having inherited a certain amount of French and Cherokee blood from his great-grandparents (Meltzer 23). Hughes' ancestry may have piqued Mason's interest since she was interested in both African American and American Indian cultures. Arnold Rampersad, an English professor and Hughes scholar at Stanford University writes: "What probably moved her [Mason] most was something she hardly expected but saw at once -- the American Indian in Langston, inherited from his mother's parents, and visible in his magnificent profile, almost straight black hair, coppercolored skin, and pacific manner."(148)

On the other hand, Hughes was attracted to Mason's wealth and her radical politics. While Mason wasn't Hughes' first patron, he nonetheless had never seen such a giving, eccentric white woman. From his college years and into the 1930s, Hughes received support from Amy Spingarn, the wife of Joel Springarn who went on to become president of the NAACP.

But Springarn's support wasn't as emotionally invested as Mason's. Mason encouraged him in a maternal fashion through giving money, monitoring his diet, reading over his manuscripts and becoming part of his life. They had no contractual agreement, but he kept a close accounting of what he spent. Mason did call on him from time to time to produce his ledger. Hughes' financial arrangements with Mason amounted to a \$150 monthly stipend. (Interestingly enough, Mason provided Hurston with \$200 per month and the use of an automobile; as a rural black woman gifted in storytelling, Hurston impressed both the rich Southern families that she was a governess for and the rich widowed Northern patron who supported her work.) In exchange for her assistance, Mason garnered prestige for nurturing Hughes' literary accomplishments. She also expected him to escort her to public functions and social gatherings such as balls and the opera. Consequently, Mason was directly responsible for Hughes' first novel, **Not Without Laughter**.

Her seemingly altruistic goal was marred by her obsession with staying in vogue, with both the public and the artistic community. While Hughes gained the financial arrangements necessary for a writer to be able

to develop a work, Mason gained the notoriety of being a supporter or patron of the Harlem Renaissance. This arrangement lasted well over four years and included a solo trip for Hughes to Cuba, his education at Lincoln University, and the continuing monthly allowance. Hughes' obligations to Mason eventually clashed with his old haunts and friends, and he became less and less a fixture of Harlem's nightlife.

Differences in Philosophical Outlook

It must be mentioned that Hughes' work, his early work in particular, focused on defining the black man in America. For example, the poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," goes back into the mythic past of the former slave and speaks with the voice of a disillusioned but world-wise narrator. As Allen Prowle noted **in The Black American Writer**, ". . . the [Harlem Renaissance] writer should try to create a sense of racial pride through a rediscovery of Africa and her culture." (Bigsby 79) This type of writer was what Charlotte Mason was looking for. But this sense of African identity was at odds with Hughes' interest in African Americans, particularly the community of Harlem in New York City.

Their relationship grew stormy after an easy beginning as Mason demanded work from Hughes, who preferred to work at his own pace. He felt, at times, as though he *had* to perform for Mason. Their impending break-up seemed to affect Hughes more than it did Mason. Advised by several friends to sever the tie, he nonetheless continued to write Mason letters to profess his fondness and love for her. She, however, turned a cold shoulder to his pleas.

Like Milton and Chaucer from the days of the poet laureate in Britain, Hughes fell out of favor with his patron. She found other, newer talent and grew tired of Hughes. A schism developed. Mason was very race conscious and interested in the primitive vision of African Americans as found in the more anthropological works of authors such as Locke and Hurston. In contrast, Hughes was more class conscious and interested in advancing themes of society, a position that he shared with Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. This philosophical stance was not uncommon in the 1930s considering the Great Depression and the results of the Russian Revolution. While his early work is more of a picture, a revelation of the past and the current state of the African American, his later work challenges the reader more and asks for and demands change and examination. Hughes' break with Mason had a direct link to the Depression, as his concern for the economically devastated was neither "pure" nor "primitive."

Perhaps Hughes sums up the reasons for the breakup best when he reflected on the loss:

". . . having just been through a tense and disheartening winter after a series of misunderstandings with the kind lady who had been my patron. She wanted me to be more African than Harlem – primitive in the simple, intuitive and noble sense of the word. I couldn't be, having grown up in Kansas City, Chicago and Cleveland." (5)

Hughes was devastated by the loss, writing to Mason continually in hopes of regaining her favor. But while losing a patron was devastating, gaining freedom served to bolster Hughes' career as a writer. He went on to publish his novels and an autobiography after the split.

Some observers have questioned the effect of patronage on the Harlem Renaissance. Nathan Huggins commented that ". . . this arrangement [patronage] stigmatized Negro poetry and prose of the 1920s as being an artistic effort that was trying to be like something other than itself." (Huggins 129) While certainly devastating from one point of view, there can be no question that the early support of Mrs. Mason launched a starving artist as a recognized writer and, more importantly, a noted literary figure.

Research and extension activities

1. Define the word patronage and discuss the relationship that typically existed between an artist and his/her patron, looking at this relationship from both perspectives, that of the artist and of the patron.

2. How might a patron influence an artist and his/her work?
3. What do you see are some of the benefits of an artist/patron relationship? The pitfalls?
4. What does the act of patronage do for the patron? Is it better to give than to receive?
5. In light of the article, what did Nathan Huggins mean with his comment "...this arrangement [patronage] stigmatized Negro poetry and prose of the 1920s as being an artistic effort that was trying to be like something other than itself."
6. An easily recognizable stereotype of our time is the person who works at a "Macjob" by day and at his/her art at night. Compare this contemporary version of the struggling artist with the patronage relationship of a time past.
7. Research historical examples of patronage. Did the system work well? Can you find evidence of negative consequences?
8. Name two famous artists who have benefitted from patronage.
9. Can you think of any examples of modern day patronage? What about the relationship between advertisers and TV show producers?
10. How could patronage be seen as an extension of slavery? Think of the behavior a slave/artist must exhibit in order to please a master/patron.

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