

Langston Hughes's "Salvation"

SOAPStone Model

Subject

Langston Hughes's essay "Salvation" articulates a naïve youth's loss of innocence and faith because of his realization that Jesus isn't "real." This realization is the result of the young persona's misinterpretation of his aunt's abstract definition of salvation as the visceral sensation of "see[ing] and hear[ing] and feel[ing] Jesus." To this, the narrator simply says, "I believed her." What he believed was that these sensory details were literal, concrete, and a matter-of-fact consequence of salvation. As is the case with this misinterpretation, Hughes often juxtaposes the intensions of the adults to the misconstrued understanding of the child. When the narrator expects to see Westley punished by God, he notes "God had not struck Westley dead for taking his name in vain or for lying in the temple." Again, the "wages of sin" have been misinterpreted by the child incapable of understanding the abstract religious metaphors conveyed by his elders. This misunderstanding here, however, creates the main irony of the piece; though Hughes's elders intended on securing the child's salvation through the described ritual, they produced the opposite effect, the child lost his faith. This loss of faith is later realized when Hughes articulates in a rambling, confused sentence, "But I was really crying because I couldn't bear to tell her that I had lied, that I had deceived everybody in the church, that I hadn't seen Jesus, and that now I didn't believe there was a Jesus anymore, since he didn't come to help me." Ironically, the coming to knowledge and epiphany that religious salvation is supposed to entail is realized in a loss of faith. Hence, the knowledge isn't a deeper appreciation of God but a rejection of God's existence.

Comment [AS1]: I start my paragraph with the claim that states my understanding of the subject of the essay.

Comment [AS2]: Here is the relevant support (data) from the essay to back up my claim. Here the support is worked into my commentary rather than having it offset by dialogue tags.

Comment [AS3]: Here is an explanation of the previous support to articulate how I interpret the support.

Comment [AS4]: Here is another part of my support for my claim.

Comment [AS5]: Here starts, in earnest, the explanation (warrant) of how the support validates my claim.

Comment [AS6]: Here is another support to further develop my argument, interpretation of Hughes's essay. Typically, more than one support is needed to address complex claims. Oversimplifying your argument with limited support and explanation doesn't serve your analysis and audience.

Comment [AS7]: Here is the concluding warrant for my last support.

Occasion

(The following analysis assumes I do not know Langston Hughes.)

Though placing the essay in a location and point in time is difficult because of the essay's brevity and scant clues, the author's choice of diction offers a few insights. When Hughes describes Westley, he notes that the irreverent boy is a "rounder's son" and he was "sitting proudly on the platform, swinging his knickerbockered legs." Both terms "knickerbocker," a pair of pants, and "rounder," a gambler, are archaic American colloquialisms. Each of these terms was last popularly utilized in the early part of the twentieth century. Therefore, the essay's setting, which places the author at "going on 13," is likely circa 1900-1930. It is the adult Hughes, however, who is reflecting back and musing on his early lesson. The essay's organization and style, as well as its social commentary (a composed articulation of a lost faith), places the essay firmly in the hands of an adult looking backwards. Therefore, if the essay was written by an adult reflecting on his early twentieth century childhood, the essay was likely written between 1930-1960. This time period was an era of civil unrest for African-Americans who were fighting for equal rights in America. The author, likely an African-American taught by "old women with jet-black faces," would have experienced many disillusionments with secular and religious organizations. Hence, an essay articulating an innocent's loss of faith would serve as a harbinger for the many disappointments that follow for an African-American during this period.

Comment [AS8]: I could have added quite a lot more to my occasion analysis with my knowledge of Langston Hughes; however, because of the likelihood of most students not having prior knowledge of the authors we read, I am feigning ignorance.

Comment [AS9]: In some cases, I might start with a claim that explicitly states the time and place of the essay's birth. However, here I decided to provide a more "conversational" analytical approach. Notice how I address all of the requirements of an occasion analysis but do so in a less rigidly structured, organic fashion; my understanding develops as the paragraph unfolds.

Comment [AS10]: Here is my embedded support for my developing claim.

Comment [AS11]: Here, the conclusion is realized with a deduction. Notice that I am not fooled by the setting of the essay. The essay was not written as the events happened. The rhetorical decisions, framing of the essay, and style are certainly developed by a skilled writer, not a child.

Comment [AS12]: The place is implied here. The essay could have been written in any part of the America. Though I believe the essay to have been written in the rural south, there isn't enough evidence in the text to prove it. So, I settle with the most specific place I can prove, America.

The most prominent universal idea expressed in the essay is the loss of faith experienced by the narrator. Though young Hughes wanted to see Jesus and withstood pressure and discomfort to do so, Jesus never appeared. Likewise, Jesus never punished Westley for mocking the sanctity of the church and one of God's commandments. As a result, Hughes came to realize that Jesus, the pillar for his elders' belief system, didn't exist in the form they promised. Here the miscommunication isn't as important as the crushed child's epiphany. In essence, though the elders didn't mean that Jesus appeared in the flesh when one obtains salvation, the misunderstood abstract intention is arbitrary to the effect Hughes experiences. The mix of guilt, frustration, and despair articulated when Hughes explains, "I couldn't bear to tell her that I had lied, that I had deceived everyone in the church, that I hadn't seen Jesus, and that now I didn't believe there was a Jesus anymore," is related to any number of reactions to disillusionments. A voter in who realizes that their votes doesn't count, a citizen who doesn't receive the same rights as their neighbor, a student who is graded not by his or her effort but by other means, all of these would experience frustration and sadness on some level and relate to Hughes's realization.

Comment [AS13]: By way of contrast, I used a more structured (inorganic) paragraph to address the universal idea. Here is my claim.

Comment [AS14]: Here, I use implicit support rather than a lengthy blocked quote. The result is less for my audience to read but still the necessary information. Implicit support, however, requires that I have provided enough ethos to be trusted with the interpretation.

Comment [AS15]: Here I provide some explicit support to prove my statement about "mix of guilt, frustration, and despair" because the evaluation was built upon a specific interpretation. It's beneficial to your audience to see what you saw to draw the same conclusions.

Comment [AS16]: I take a bit of a risk by offering analogies. These analogies offer no direct analysis of the text, but do qualify my "mix" statement and support my claim.

Audience

Hughes's explicit audience comprises adults who have experienced a loss of faith or disillusionment in their lives. Hughes's intent manifests in his treatment of his younger self. Hughes's narrator can't articulate the reason for his emotional reaction to the day's events, "for the first time in my life but one for was a big boy of twelve years old—I cried...and couldn't stop." Here, the author's use of "big boy" presents a dramatic irony that the adult audience would appreciate. Twelve years old is only old to a child. An adult audience likely sees no shame in a child crying, but the narrator is ashamed of his reaction. This irony, an appeal to the audience's emotions, is intended to build empathy for the child, a vulnerable "big boy" after all. This appeal is aimed to ready the audience for the boy's epiphany; though the audience will certainly include people who have not lost their religious faith, it's more difficult to dismiss the end of the essay if you empathize with the narrator.

Comment [AS17]: Here is the claim.

Comment [AS18]: Transition with deliberate use of logic glue.

Comment [AS19]: Support

Comment [AS20]: I follow with an explanation of Hughes's use of rhetoric to convey the relevance of my support. It is important to remember that with rhetorical analysis, you should use (and explain) the more subtle rhetorical decisions that constitute the larger meanings.

Comment [AS21]: I start with an obvious claim.

Hughes's implicit audience includes people who have experienced religious or societal pressure. The "swirl" of emotions and environment that one experiences in a pressured situation is expressed in Hughes stating, "Now it was really getting late. I began to be ashamed of myself, holding everything up so long...and [got] up [to] be saved." The "ashamed" feeling and subsequent reaction are the effects of pressure and not a choice of the narrator's free will. An audience who has felt this type of pressure would be furthered engaged by the vulnerability of the narrator's age. The narrator, unable to choose even his religious convictions for himself, serves as a pathetic, obvious example of a subjugated target of pressure.

Comment [AS22]: Support

Comment [AS23]: Warrant

Purpose

Hughes wrote this narrative to convey his loss of faith in Jesus and the religious structure of his youth; however, this is also an argument against the systems that situate "a big boy twelve years old" to cry incessantly. This argument is formed through a series of antitheses. From the ill-mannered Westley to the well-mannered narrator, from the expected elation of salvation to the reality of the day's rituals, from the abstract intent of the aunt to the narrator's understanding of her statement, all of these polarities articulate a contrast. Consider Hughes's description of the elders in church. "A great many old people came and knelt around us and prayed, old women with jet-black faces and braided hair, old men with work-gnarled hands." Hughes's description of the old people illustrates the stark contrast of the

Comment [AS24]: I acknowledge that the essay is a narrative, its dominant rhetorical mode, but I offer the qualification that Hughes concludes with an argument to address the complex construction of the essay.

Comment [AS25]: Transition

Comment [AS26]: Support

Comment [AS27]: An illustration/support qualifying the previous statement.

young “lambs” and the persistent elders. The imagery could be taken as either antithesis to the youth and/or as frightening. With this contrast, the audience would likely see the not described youth as more familiar than the grotesque old people. With the audience identifying with the narrator, Hughes leads the audience to the pathetic ending. Here we are left with a child disillusioned and crying as a result of the pressures placed on his innocence by the “gnarled” old people and the church.

Comment [AS28]: The warrant

Speaker

Langston Hughes, recounting his childhood religious epiphany, presumes that the audience finds losing religious faith a negative effect. This implicit presumption about what the audience accepts is illustrated in the conclusion of the essay. During the essay’s epiphany, Hughes use of repetition of the clause “I cried” as well as his purposefully awkward ultimate—cumulative— sentence, created with a polysyndeton, are designed to evoke pathos in an audience receptive to the argument Hughes has crafted. An audience that finds losing religious faith negative will likely find the end effect of Hughes’s “salvation” to be a detrimental experience for the youth. An audience who sees losing religious faith to be positive would likely justify the boy’s trauma as a necessary lesson of the manipulative nature of the church and perhaps religion itself. This audience would find Hughes’s pain as unfortunate but necessary to reach enlightenment.

Comment [AS29]: Here is our SOAPStone Outline Model topic sentence form in action.

Comment [AS30]: Next, I provide enough support to illustrate relevance without bogging the analysis down with block quotes.

Comment [AS31]: The warrant

The more notable rhetorical decision in the essay is Hughes’s use of the word “see.” Hughes initially uses the word plainly. Next, he italicizes the word to add emphasis and stress the differing interpretation of the word. This word is further stress by its inclusion in a brief paragraph offset from the longer constructions that precede and follow. The “see” that is used matter-of-factly is intended to be taken as the aunt intended. An adult audience is unlikely to take the aunt’s prescribed effect literally. The second italicized “see,” however, illustrates the boy’s skewed, literal interpretation of the aunt’s statement and leaves little doubt of the conundrum. This rhetorical decision creates the dilemma of the essay; religious meaning is often metaphorical, while children typically interpret words literally. Because the aunt doesn’t anticipate the child’s confusion and because church doesn’t ask for an authentic spiritual epiphany, the boy is ultimately corrupted and traumatized.

Comment [AS32]: This is the central rhetorical decision of the essay. Hughes italicizes it and places it alone with structure to accentuate its importance.

Comment [AS33]: Support

Comment [AS34]: Here is my explanation of rhetorical function.

Comment [AS35]: Here I address the rhetorical purpose for the decision/decisions.

Hughes uses figurative language to convey his childhood experience and to argue that religious indoctrination could result in spiritual alienation. In describing the room after Hughes gives in and gets up to obtain salvation, Hughes describes “a sea of shouting, as they saw me rise. Waves of rejoicing swept the place.” Here Hughes uses two metaphors that connect the elation in the room to water. The shouting is immense, as a sea is large. The rejoicing washed over him like powerful waves with enough force to “sweep the place.” Perhaps the narrator is drowning in the hubbub that ironically follows an insincere salvation. Perhaps Hughes is mocking the ignorance of the elders and their lack of situational awareness. Additionally, Hughes uses the figurative imagery of the implied movement of “waves” and his explicit “rising” to create a sense of movement, in effect, breaking the tension that had existed before when Hughes was waiting to “see Jesus.” The description of the scale of events (the “sea” vs. the child) and movement are intended to persuade the audience to empathize with the child, who is “swept” up in an uncontrollable, chaotic situation. Hughes calculates that an audience empathetically connected to the narrator will be emotionally affected by the essay’s ending and argument.

Comment [AS36]: In this claim/topic sentence, I state the rhetorical decision and tie that choice to the author’s purpose. In doing so, I preview the argument I construct in the paragraph.

Comment [AS37]: Support

Comment [AS38]: My first rhetorical observation is the most obvious. The analogous nouns are associated because of their dominant qualities.

Comment [AS39]: The sense of movement, the implied use of verbs, is more subtle and ultimately more insightful for my audience. An observation like this builds ethos (and impresses AP Exam graders).

Comment [AS40]: Not satisfied with my initial warrants, I end the paragraph with an explanation of “So what?” I explicitly explain the rhetorical decisions importance to the essay’s purpose; I explain how it creates meaning.

Tone

Hughes exhibits a solemn yet, at times, humorous tone to convey this childhood event and to argue that unqualified religious pressure could result in a loss of faith. The essay begins and continues until the last paragraph with naïve and humorous tone. When Westley, the foul-mouthed rounder's son, tires of the pressure to be saved, he exclaims, "God damn! I'm tired o' sitting here. Let's get up and be saved."

The irony of the disrespectful child making a mockery of this esteemed ritual through his crass surrender is intended to catch the audience off guard and offer a possible course of action for the narrator to consider. This elevation of tone to humor is likely meant to make the descent that follows more dramatic, more effective.

The dominant tone, solemnity, is expressed through the irony that Hughes creates at the end of the essay with the juxtaposition of the "joyous singing" that filled the room after Hughes's "salvation," and the imagery of the inconsolable boy crying under quilts. This contrast pushes the narrative from the lighter humor of Westley's irreverence and the celebratory actions of the elders to a somber realization that the day's events affected the child's very faith in authority and God. Hughes's choice in diction with gloomy connotative words like "crying," "buried," "couldn't bear," and "didn't come to help me" make the final emphasis of the essay decidedly negative.

Comment [AS41]: I offer two tone words to address the essay's complexity and connect those words to the subject of the essay.

Comment [AS42]: Support

Comment [AS43]: This warrant explains how the humorous tone is manifest in the essay and also previews the next tone word's rationale.

Comment [AS44]: Unlike my analysis of rhetorical devices, I decided to put the more importance analysis last. This order mirrors the chronology of events in the essay and underscores the reason for why Hughes provides the tonal shift at the end—to emphasize the devastating effect of the day's events.

Comment [AS45]: Having already quoted these parts earlier in my analysis, I opt to use implicit contextual support and an explicit focus on diction to validate my claim.