

**LANGSTON HUGHES' SELECTED POEMS IN RIFFATERRE'S  
PERSPECTIVE  
(*PUISI-PUISI LANGSTON HUGHES TERPILIH DALAM PERSPEKTIF  
RIFFATERRE*)**

**Nova Munawaratul Riana, Moch.Ilham, Hat pujiati,  
English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Jember  
Jln. Kalimantan 37, Jember 68121  
*e-mail:novariana.30@gmail.com***

**Abstract**

This research studies the significance of Hughes' three selected poems entitled, *The Mother to Son*, *Trumpet Player* and *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* by using Michael Riffaterre's theory, *Semiotic of Poetry*. The purpose of this study is to find out the significance of three poems which deals with the history of African-Americans slavery in 1920s. Riffaterre states that the poem suggests indirections. Indirections are produced by displacing, distorting, and creating meaning. To find the significance of the poem, we use analytical method presents by Riffaterre. They are *heuristic* and *hermeneutic reading*. Heuristic reading is applied to find out the meaning in the dictionary. In heuristic reading, we will find the meaning, model and variants. Hermeneutic reading is semiotics' process which takes place in the reader's mind and in this stage of reading, we will find matrix, hypogram, and significance. The significance of three poems of Hughes produces *liberalism* as the spirit of the era. Liberalism includes individual freedom and individual justice in the society.

**Keywords:** African-American slavery in 1920s, Riffaterre Semiotics of Poetry, Hughes, Liberalism.

**Abstrak**

Penelitian ini mengkaji signifikansi tiga puisi terpilih Hughes yang berjudul *The Mother to Son*, *Trumpet Player* dan *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* dengan menggunakan teori Michael Riffaterre yakni semiotika puisi. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menemukan signifikansi dari tiga puisi tersebut. Riffaterre menyatakan bahwa puisi memberi kesan yang tidak langsung. Ketidak langsungan kesan tersebut diproduksi oleh pergantian makna, pergeseran makna dan pembuatan makna. Untuk menemukan makna dari puisi, kami menggunakan metode analisis yang dihadirkan oleh Riffaterre yakni pembacaan heuristik and hermeneutik. Pembacaan heuristik diaplikasikan untuk menemukan arti dari kamus. Dalam pembacaan heuristik, kami akan menemukan arti, model dan varian. Pembacaan hermeneutik adalah proses semiotika yang ada pada pemikiran pembaca dan di pembacaan inilah kami menemukan matrik, hipogram dan makna signifikansi. Makna signifikansi dari tiga puisi Hughes adalah sebuah pemikiran liberalisme. Liberalisme terdiri dari kebebasan dan keadilan individu dalam masyarakat.

**Keywords:** perbudakan Afrika-Amerika di tahun 1920-an, Semiotika Puisi Riffaterre, Hughes, Liberalisme.

**Introduction**

Langston Hughes was one of famous writers, poet, short story writer, playwright, and columnist. He was African-American, European and Native American descent. In his life, he was born and grew up in African-American community (Scott, 1994: 65). In October 1929 in United States of America, Great Depression was happened. It influences social system and culture in the United States of America (Putra, 2012:21).

In that era, there was no policy about equality. As it was happened to many people who lived there, they had no policy for their equality in society, especially The African-Americans. In that era, The African-Americans did not have a right. "Africans-Americans, freed from bondage but subject to segregation, discrimination, and violence, had nevertheless managed to find a foothold in the American economy and civic life by the 1920s" (Greenberg, 2009:1). Some of Hughes' poems relate to history of African-American slavery are *The Mother to Son*, *Trumpet Player* and *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*. Through those poems, Hughes portrayed the situation and condition of African-Americans, such as the efforts of African-Americans under the slavery system of whites and their hopes to their future.

**Method of Research**

This research dismantles the life of African-American in the slavery era in 1920s. The analysis of this research starts from collecting data, which is derived into two kinds. Those are primary data which are taken from Hughes' three selected poems; *The Mother to Son*, *Trumpet Player*, and *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*. The secondary data of this research are taken from books entitled *Semiotic of Poetry* by Michael Riffaterre, journals and internet sources. To analyze those three poems, this research applies three steps to do. First, selecting and comprehending the data in the form of words, phrases, sentences, stanzas of the poem. Second, two stages of reading, heuristic reading and hermeneutic reading is applied. In heuristic reading, we find the meaning mimetically. In this case, we highlight the poems that contain ungrammaticalities. Model and variants are also analyzed in this stage. In Hermeneutic reading, we modify the opinions and history of African-American slavery as hypograms with the meaning which is gained at the mimetic level. Therefore, the significance of those poems is reached.

### Result of Analysis

After analysing three poems of Hughes through two stages of reading, the result of the data analysis are found. There are three significances of Hughes' poems. The significance of *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* is found as miserable life of the African-Americans in their society. The significance of the poem entitled *Mother to Son* is a motivation. The significance of *Trumpet Player* is silent resistance of African-Americans.

From three significances above, it can be concluded that Hughes' poems show the *liberalism* as the spirit of the era. Liberal society is one that is, or attempts to be, open society, a free and tolerant environment where the widest possible range of pursuits are allowed, consistent with equal such as opportunities to everyone.

### Discussion

Langston Hughes' poems explore the life of African-American in the slavery era in 1920s through *Mother to Son*, *Trumpet Player* and *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*. Hughes explores his thought through his poems.

*I've known rivers*

*I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the  
Flow of human blood in human veins*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers*

*I bathed in Euphrates when dawns were young  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
Went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy  
Bosom turn all golden in the sunset*

*I've known rivers:  
Ancient, dusky rivers.*

*My soul has grown deep like rivers*

(The Negro Speaks of Rivers Lines 1-13)

The meaning which is in heuristic reading is still unclear, it shows that there is a Negro person who knows about some rivers. He knows some ancient rivers as the world and the rivers which are described by him are older than human blood in human veins. He does his activity in those rivers. He bathes in *Euphrates* River, builds his hut near the *Congo* River, looks upon the *Nile* River and raises the pyramids, then, he hears the singing of the *Mississippi* River. When he hears the sound of the water flowing of Mississippi river, he sees Abe Lincoln goes down to New Oearland. He says that the colour of the ancients rivers (*Euphrates*, *Congo*, *Nile*, *Mississippi* River) is black. In the end, this Negro person says that his soul has grown deep like that rivers.

After the meaning is reached in heuristic reading above, model and variants of this poem is also found. The model of this poem is is the word *Rivers*. It is chosen as the model of the poem because this word is monumental. This model is explained through some variants in the poem. The model *Rivers* is explained by the phrase *River ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins*. It means that the river which is described by the Negro person is the ancient river and it is older than the flow of the blood in human veins. It means that those rivers have existed before human being in the world.

The model *Rivers* is also explained by the names of the rivers itself. They are *Euphrates* River, *Congo* River, *Nile* River and *Mississippi* River. The speaker says that he is doing his/her activity in those rivers. It indicates that these rivers become the witness of that Negro person. For instance, he/she builds the pyramids near the *Nile* River. It indicates the journey life of the speaker is also represented by the existence of the *Nile* River. Then, the phrase *Ancient, dusky rivers* also explains the model. It explains that ancient rivers are dusky rivers. It shows the colour of those ancient rivers is black. The model and variants above, leads the researcher to cover the significance of this poem.

In hermeneutic reading, the significance found of this poem is the miserable life of African-American in 1920s. It is described that famous rivers are mentioned by Hughes including the longest rivers in the world. Those rivers are located in the different continents. *Euphrates*, *Congo*, *Nile* belongs to African's continent, while *Mississippi* belongs to America. Actually, those rivers are symbolism. It has close relationship with the history of enslavement of African-American people. Hughes uses the metaphor of rivers, to comment on the history of Black experiences (Dace, 1997:201). The *Euphrates* is considered the beginning place of western civilization. It is a river that flows down through Iraq to Southern Iraq and it is the longest river in western Asia. The land between Euphrates and its sister river, is Tigris. It is thought to be the site of the starting place of civilization. The *Congo* River also has close relationship with the history of the poem. The Congo River forms in central Africa in the present day country of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The river flows north in the DRC, then west, then southwest to the Atlantic Ocean. Many African were abducted from the Congo region and sold into slavery. Then, the Nile River is also considered the longest river in the world. In this case, the *Nile* River has relationship with the history of slavery. African-Americans were among those who constructed the pyramids not far from the Nile at Giza, Saraqqah, Dahshur and other sites. For a long time, Egyptian rulers forced African-Americans into slavery in order to build pyramids. The *Mississippi* is a river in America which represents the African-American's movements from Africa into America. It relates to the life journey of African-American people in enslavement. This river also represents the African-American slaves laboured along its shores, and enslaved at towns and settlements within site of the *Mississippi*. Those explanation clearly shows that African-American people become slaves at that time. Although they are slaves, they still try to keep moving on. They still hope that slavery will be deleted. This struggle is found in the poem *Mother to Son*.

*Well, son, I tell you  
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair  
It's had tacks in it  
And splinters  
And boards torn up  
And places with no carpet on the floor  
Bare  
But all the time  
I've been a-climbin' on  
And reachin' landin's  
And turnin' corners  
And sometimes goin' in the dark  
Where there ain't been no light  
So boy, don't you turn back  
Don't you set down on the steps  
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard  
Don't you fall now-  
For I've still goin', honey  
I've still climbin'  
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair*

(Mother to Son Lines 1-20)

The meaning is reached at the mimetic level explains that there are two persons, a mother with her son. They are doing conversation. This mother has purposes to tell her son about life. The life which is described by this mother is the life which is not like a crystal stair. Crystal stair has "tacks", "splinters", "boards torn up", and "no carpet on the floor." Tack means a small nail with flat head and splinters mean sharp piece of wood. This mother also explains that the life which is not like a crystal stair here is also a place with no carpet on the floor and it is also bare. Then, she tells the efforts to go through it. She climbs and reaches the top, but she falls all over again. Sometimes, she goes in the dark. She goes on the place where there is no light there. She tells that story in order to give her son

description of life and her efforts to go through it. She wants her son not to turn back from his way and should set down on the steps. She also says to her son not to fall, because she is still going and keeps trying.

The model found in this poem is a sentence, *Life for me ain't been no crystal stair*. It is explained through the word *tacks* which explains that life that is not like crystal stair and it has tacks in it. It means that life which goes through by the mother is not an easy life as others go through it. *Tacks* are like obstacles in her life. The word *climbin' on* is also variant that supports the model. It explains the life which is not like a *crystal stair*. It means that, it explains the *stair* itself. Stair has some sets of series in it. There is upper and down floor in it. It means that the mother has been gone through some steps of the floor to reach her goal or desire. It is also supported by other variants *reachin' landin's* which means she keeps trying to reach the top. It explains life is not like a crystal stair. The life she goes through is not luxurious life, that is why she still reach the landing. *Goin' in the dark* also variant which proves how the mother still set her steps to go through her way of life.

The significance found in this poem then is a motivation which is given by the old African-American to their next generation. This poem explains Hughes' view on exploring the life of African-Americans who struggle against discrimination in the slavery era but they are still dreaming and hoping. In the second stage of reading, it is explained through the lines below.

*But all the time*

*I've been a-climbin' on*

*And reachin' landin's*

*And turnin' corners*

*And sometimes goin' in the dark*

*Where there ain't been no light*

The lines above show strongly how this mother as an old African-American does her efforts to keep trying to reach the top. She keeps moving on her life journey. Hughes tries to tell other African-Americans next generation that life must be faced up in any condition. The word *climbin'*, *reachin' landin'*, *turnin'* and *goin'* are also a proof that they are African-Americans. Those indicate the language of colloquial element of African-American people or the characteristics of non-standard English language which especially used by Black English (Wolfram, 1984: 226).

From the description above, Hughes gives the reader advice to keep trying although they may fall all over again. In addition, the author displays the *Son* in the poem as a picture of the African-Americans next generation to survive in their way of life, although they find the darkness and bad condition. They also should keep on their efforts to solve their problem to reach their goal of life. Furthermore, that kind of motivation is hoped to make a kind of movement. In the poem *Trumpet Player*, Hughes shows African-American people make a movement under the control of whites.

*The Negro*

*With the trumpet at his lips*

*Has dark moons of weariness*

*Beneath his eyes*

*Where the smoldering memory*

*Of slave ships*

*Blazed to the crack of whips*

*About his things*

*The Negro*

*With the trumpet at his lips*

*Has a head of vibrant hair*

*Tamed down,*

*Patent-leathered now*

*Until it gleams*

*Like jet*

*Were jet a crown*

*The music*

*From the trumpet at his lips*

*Is honey*

*Mixed with the liquid of fire*

*The rhythm*

*From the trumpet at his lips  
Is ecstasy  
Distilled from old desire*

*Desire  
That is longing for the moon  
Where the moonlight's but a spotlight  
In his eyes,  
Desire  
That is longing for the sea  
Where the sea's a bar-glass  
Sucker size*

*The Negro  
With the trumpet at his lips  
Whose jacket  
Has a fine one-button roll,  
Does not know  
Upon what riff the music slips*

*It's hypodermic needle  
To his soul  
But softly  
As the tune comes from his throat  
Trouble  
Mellows to a golden note*

(Trumpet Player Lines 1-44)

The meaning which is gained at the mimetic level tells that there is a man who comes from African-American community. He plays a trumpet at his lips. He feels scared because of his smoldering memory about slavery. It means that he is gone through the slavery era. In that slavery era, he makes a movement. Every thing he does is under the control of person or people. It means that, there is person or people who control him. He has hard and shiny skin and the colour of his body is actually black. He makes and does a movement. Then, he supposes if he makes a movement he will get a position. It is just his supposition. This Negro man likes to play trumpet. It indicates that he likes music. For him, music is like honey, music is sweet. He plays the rhythm of the music to show his strong emotion. He wants to show his emotion of feeling scared.

He has old desire. He is longing for something shining and beautiful. He is longing for the moonlights, but what he gets is a little spotlight. He is also longing for wide area as sea, while what he gets just small part. This Negro man is also having pride. He likes to play music, but he does not know about what riff he will play. He needs music all the time, because music is ecstasy (medicine) that can be injected by the hypodermic needle. Then, the model found in this poem is the title itself. The title can mean as a sign. It can introduce the poem that crown and at the same time refers to a text outside it (Riffaterre, 1978: 99). The title of this poem is *Trumpet Player*. It is explained through the desire he wants to reach. His desire is something shining and beautiful, while what he gets is just small lights. It is proved by these phrases *that is longing for the moon, where the moonlight's but a spotlight*. The model *Trumpet player* is also described by phrase *It's hypodermic needle*. It explains that he likes music and music becomes his medicine which can be injected to his body (soul). The significance found in these lines.

*Whose jacket  
Has a fine one-button roll,  
Does not know  
Upon what riff the music slips  
It's hypodermic needle  
To his soul*

It shows that the trumpet player is proud of being African-Americans although they are in bad situation. They still have movement which is represented by the phrase *fine one button roll*. Hughes expresses the Jazz music as his dream and his aspiration. This music becomes the point and the way African-Americans express their aspiration to be better in their next life.

Finally, the significance found in three selected poems of Hughes is the miserable life of African-American people which then creates a kind of motivation to their next generation. Then, the motivation which has been given to their next generation will make a desire to make a movement emerge. Eventually, at the end Hughes wants to show liberalism as the last destination of the movement.

### Conclusion

After the matrix and significances of three poems are found, those poems are concluded in to one significance. The significance of *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* is found as miserable life of the African-Americans in their society. It tells that Hughes relates his life to his ancestors to show how long oppression and the equality which is corrupted by the whites in the African-Americans society happened. The significance of the poem entitled *Mother to Son* is a motivation. It explains Hughes' view on exploring the life of African-Americans who struggle against discrimination in the slavery era but they are still dreaming and hoping. The significance of *Trumpet Player* is silent resistance of African-Americans. It tells that music becomes their movement to unite their race. From three significances above, it can be concluded that those three Langston Hughes' selected poems show the African-Americans' voices. Those poems give the feeling of sadness at the fact that the African-American people are not considered equal to the whites. This is Hughes' voice as a vehicle for social protest as the African-American people. He puts his soul into the poems and he is speaking out the truth about the misery of African-American society he lives in. In conclusion, his poems show the *liberalism* as the spirit of the era. Liberal society is one that is, or attempts to be, open society, a free and tolerant environment where the widest possible range of pursuits are allowed, consistent with equal such as opportunities to everyone.

### Acknowledgements

Our sincere gratitude is hereby extended to: Prof. Dr. Akhmad Sofyan, M.Hum as the dean of Faculty of Humanities ; all of the lecturers of English Department who have taught many new things throughout my academic years; and all of the staffs of the Central Library and Faculty of Humanities' library for helping to provide thesis and references.

### References

#### Books:

- Dace, Tish. 1997. *Langston Hughes: The Contemporary Reviews*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Greenberg, Cheryl Lynn. 2009. *To Ask for Equal Chance: African and American in The Great Depression Era*. United States: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, Inc.
- Riffaterre, Michael. 1978. *Semiotics of Poetry*. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press
- Scott, Jonathan. 1994. *The Socialist Joy in The Writing of Langston Hughes*. Missouri: Missouri University Press.
- Wolfram, Walt. 1984. "Some Illustrative Features of Black English". *Varieties of American English: A Reader*, edited by Dennis R. Preston & Roger W. Shuy. Washington, D.C.: English Language Programs Division Bureau of Educational & Cultural Affairs United States Information Agency

#### Internet Sources:

- [http://www.poemhunter.com/i/ebooks/pdf/langston\\_hughes\\_2012\\_2.pdf](http://www.poemhunter.com/i/ebooks/pdf/langston_hughes_2012_2.pdf) accessed on September 1st 2015 at 20:42 pm