

ENGL 310 Modern Poetry

March 30, 2007

Discussion Section: Langston Hughes

Context for Langston Hughes Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto*

The most profound change that Harlem experienced in the 1920's was its emergence as a slum. Largely within the space of a single decade Harlem was transformed from a potentially ideal community to a neighborhood with manifold social and economic problems.¹

To touch most areas of Harlem life in the 1920's is to touch tragedy. This was especially true of the health of the community.²

If the 1920's added anything to our knowledge of social conditions in Harlem, it presented a distorted and negative image of reality. The Negro community was "discovered" in the twenties, and its reputation was not that of a tragic slum, but a "place of laughing, swaying, and dancing"; and this image spread not only throughout the nation but throughout the world.³

In the literature of the twenties, Negroes were conceived as "expressive" ("a singing race") in a society burdened with "unnatural inhibitions". . . Negroes were still thought to be alienated from traditional American virtues and values, as they had been since colonial times, but this was now considered a great asset.⁴

"The rosy enthusiasms and hopes of 1925," Alain Locke said ten years later, "were. . . cruelly deceptive mirages." The ghetto was revealed in the thirties as "a nasty, sordid corner into which black folk are herded—a Harlem that the social worker knew all along but had not been able to dramatize. . . *There is no cure or saving magic in poetry and art* for. . . precarious marginal employment, high mortality rates, civic neglect," Locke concluded. It was this Harlem, the neighborhood not visible "from the raucous interior of a smokefilled, jazzdrunken cabaret," the Harlem hidden by the "bright surface. . . of. . . night clubs, cabaret tours and. . . arty magazines," that was devastated by the Depression.⁵

¹ Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto; Negro New York, 1890–1930*, 2nd ed., 1966 (rpt. Chicago: Elephant, 1996), p. 135.

² *Ibid.*, 141.

³ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 187 (ellipses in the quotations of Locke are Osofsky's; the emphasis is mine).