



Langston Hughes

(1902-1967)

Florida Road Workers (1927)

I'm makin' a road
For the cars
To fly by on.
Makin' a road
Through the palmetto thicket
For light and civilization
To travel on.

Makin' a road
For the rich old white men
To sweep over in their big cars
And leave me standin' here.

Sure,
A road helps all of us!
White folks ride--
And I get to see 'em ride.
I ain't never seen nobody
Ride so fine before.
Hey buddy!
Look at me.
I'm makin' a road!

ANALYSIS

During the 1920s, road workers in the South were often inmates on chain gangs. Many were black. The resentful tone of the reference in line 9 to “rich old white men” suggests that the speaker is the opposite--poor, young and black. Will he live to be old? That the big cars flying by on the roads of Florida were in fact driven by rich old white men--who could deny that?--gives authority to the speaker that validates his resentment. The moral content and language of the poem are based on indisputable facts and given form in a roadside image familiar to everyone. The possibility that the road worker may be a prisoner in manacles evokes the history of slavery and continuing oppression. The manifest injustice implied by the historical polarization and hierarchy of black and white enlarges the scope of the poem from Florida to America.

The poem looks simple, no doubt like the black road worker looks to the rich old white men flying by. The closer a reader looks at the poem, the more it becomes, and the more the road worker becomes, for the poem is like the man and manifests his spirit. Transcendence is evident in his (1) lack of egotism, expressed by understatement--he does not even mention his race, let alone plead his cause (what good would that do in 1927?); (2) his ability to take pride in his work though he will not profit from it fairly, if at all, contributing to the progress of “light and civilization” (light evokes enlightenment, as in *Invisible Man* [1952] by Ralph Ellison) which may improve “the road” ahead; (3) his friendly attitude toward the “white folks,” overcoming his resentment to such an extent he even calls out to the rich old white man, “Hey, buddy!” Because “a road helps all of us!”

His pride in his work--his transcendence--and perhaps even his survival, depend on his attitude toward race and injustice. Decades in advance of Martin Luther King, Jr., Langston Hughes was by implication affirming a Dream, a faith in the road ahead, if we just keep working at it: building the road represents social progress, which inspires hope of racial progress. The poem begins and ends with expressions of pride in his work that convey his ability to transcend his lowly status among white folks--his ability to “fly” in the spiritual sense--to fly as Milkman does in *Song of Solomon* (1977) by Toni Morrison half a century after this poem was published. The first stanza is a declaration of his individuality and the value of his work: “I’m makin’ a road,” not “We’re makin’...” The second stanza is significantly the shortest stanza in the poem, where he expresses resentment at being left behind, just “standin’ here.” Without this resentment, he would be accepting his oppression. His resentment is justified, progressive and moral, yet paradoxically (paradox is a characteristic of literature in the transcendental mode) he must overcome it, put behind him this negative feeling in order to go on making the road.

In the last stanza he affirms America--“all of us”--then qualifies the affirmation with sarcasm: “White folks ride-- / And I get to see ‘em ride.” His sarcasm is softened by the pastoral term “folks,” a gesture of conciliation that is progress from the resentful phrase “rich old white men,” which only increases racial polarization. At the same time, however, the next two lines amount to putting on a verbal mask: “I ain’t never seen nobody / Ride so fine before.” The double negative suggests a double attitude, as his polite affirmation masks a subversive protest: We road workers are making you such a fine life, materially, the finest in history, the least you can do is “Look at me.” If you continue to disregard me, your ride won’t be so fine. This is the protest expressed in the Prologue of *Invisible Man*: “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.” Just as the resentment in the second stanza unmasks resentment concealed back in the first stanza, the line “Hey buddy!” acquires a connotation of challenge with the demand, “Look at me.”

In the last line, he repeats the first line, but the meaning has changed: At the outset he is making a road for the rich old white men--“For the cars / To fly by on”--whereas at the end, he is making a road as a contribution to progress for “all of us.”

Michael Hollister (2015)

See “We Wear the Mask” (1895), Paul Dunbar
& “Black Tambourine” (1926), Hart Crane