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Realism through Langston Hughes' "Ballad of the Landlord": How to Tell a True Story that Didn't Happen

Few quotes have ever stuck with me more than the line in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, "But it's the truth even if it didn't happen." It's a short and simple sentence that both rings true to the story Kesey was telling as well as to almost every situation and style of storytelling that involves conclusions from fictional portrayals or metaphorical explanation. This idea can be applied even more clearly in styles that utilize realism. Consider how Langston Hughes' 1957 "Ballad of the Landlord" still rings just as, if not truer, in a 2020 United States facing a looming eviction crisis still recovering from the housing bubble bursting in 2008. Within his poem, Hughes tells a story in a realistic way both by accepting and denying traditional methods of realism, in telling true stories in extremely realistic ways while also introducing artistic embellishments in order to enhance the implications and impact of that story.

According to the Oxford Dictionary definition of realism, realism is a style of writing that "gives the impression of recording or "reflecting" faithfully an actual way of life" with a big note from modern voices on the subject that realism doesn't just denote a style of writing that ring true to an actual lived experience but also creates its own sense of a very real world within the piece itself. It seems that realism exists when a piece simultaneously harkens to a lived experience that feels possible and relatable to a reader, as well as articulating its own reality and purpose with the same degree of nuance and plausibility that would exist for a true story.

Analyzing the distinctions between these two elements of realistic stories can become convoluted if the reader is interested only in determining what actually happened or what could actually happen, but if instead you utilize the stories to develop more insights and understandings about unique experiences, this style of storytelling can be extremely effective. Hughes' poem is a great example of this because of the way it both embraces and denies elements of realism.

This poem embraces realism first by focusing on an interaction between a landlord and tenant, which is of course a common occurrence both when Hughes was writing the poem and still to this day. Once the reader has been positioned to understand the interaction as a normal one, we've been positioned to accept this as a reliable retelling. Along with this Hughes tells this story through dialogue, initially spoken from the perspective of the tenant. By doing this we are again positioned to receive this as a very real story, similar to the way a script exists to communicate interactions between people making it easy to envision it actually happening. This dialogue while one-sided for a majority of the poem develops a clear picture of what the situation is, beginning "Landlord, landlord," we have an immediate understanding of the relationship. From here Hughes also uses subtle vernacular differences between the two speakers, such as "member," "bucks," "more'n" and other simple conjunctions from the tenant and formal English from the landlord sixth stanza to explain the divide that exists between these two even more. Finally, the disputes being discussed by the tenant are ones that almost anyone who has rented an old home or apartment can understand as very real concerns and sympathize with.

After developing this understanding within the reader of this being a story about a situation that most people can understand and at least imagine experiencing, there is a break in the narration once we reach the sixth and seventh stanza. In doing this the poem has for many readers broken its commitment to realistic storytelling, both because the unexplained shift forces

the reader to take a step back in order to understand what has occurred (and does it twice) and by escalating the situation to one that some may not recognize as promptly. Not only is there a break in the narration, but we also lose the style of poetic dialogue and shift to broken prose that echo like stage directions and headlines concluding, “MAN THREATENS LANDLORD/ TENANT HELD NO BAIL/ JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL!” These shifts snap the reader into a new reality that for many can be shocking. Though these methods seem to break from the straightforward realist storytelling I described earlier, it is my assertion that these methods actually create an even more honest and impactful story both about the dynamics that exist individually between the landlord and tenant as well as the structures that exist in order to establish and maintain this dynamic. The reader in an extremely short amount of time follows a tragic story that highlights the injustice of this situation. The reality described to us is one where one person can continue to abuse another and be supported by the institutions that claim to defend all.

This poem tells a story that is becoming unnervingly more and more recognizable today and a relationship that is insidious to many, but by design of the state. When the landlord calls for the police we are unsettled, but when our tenant receives jail time the message about the injustices, we allow to exist is clear. Hughes does this by introducing the reader to a story they recognize and developing deeper reality and truth that can be found within that dynamic. BY walking us through this and breaking our expectations we’re forced to consider the realities we so often ignore. All in all, it appears that we are told a very realistic story with an extraordinarily unreal ending.