"I, Too" was included in Langston Hughes's first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, published in 1926. The poem reflects Hughes's dream that one day segregation will end. According to the poem, when that happens, all men, white and black, will sit together at the same table, sharing equally in the opportunities that the American dream offers. "I, Too" is a response to nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing." Where Whitman rejoices in a
country that offers him all that he wants, Hughes's poem makes clear that the United States does not provide a joyous experience for all its citizens. Hughes's poem is deceptively simple; its straightforward structure and deliberate choice of words suggest strength and determination. Hughes wrote "I, Too" in 1924 while stranded in Genoa, Italy, after his passport and wallet were stolen. Genoa had a busy port and Hughes tried to catch a ride back to the United States as a deckhand, but no ship would take him. After watching several white men easily get rides, Hughes wrote "I, Too" and mailed it to New York, hoping to sell the poem and make some money. There is no record of whether the poem brought Hughes any money, but the poem's theme of inequality reflects the world that Hughes saw around him, a world in which white sailors were free to refuse to serve with a black man, thus stranding him in Italy with no identification or money.


**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

James Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, on February 1, 1902, to Carrie Langston and James Nathaniel Hughes. Hughes's father was unable to find steady employment in Joplin and, by the time his son was eighteen months old, he decided to move to Mexico to live. Hughes's mother refused to join her husband and began traveling from city to city looking for work. Hughes's parents were later divorced. Although Hughes occasionally accompanied his mother as she traveled, for much of his childhood he was raised by his maternal grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas. For a year after his grandmother's death in 1915, Hughes lived occasionally with his mother and sometimes with a family friend. By 1916, he was again living with his mother, who had remarried. The family settled in Lincoln, Illinois, where Hughes enrolled at Central High School. Hughes did well in high school and began writing poetry for the school magazine. After graduation, he spent a year living with his father in Mexico, where he wrote poetry and a short play for children, both of which were published in 1921 in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) magazine *Brownies' Book*. Another poem and an essay were published in *Crisis*, also in 1921.

Hughes then enrolled at Columbia University in New York City, where he encountered racism on campus, especially in the
Hughes was able to find work as a cabin boy on a ship bound for Africa. He returned to the United States within the year but then left for Paris a few months later. After he returned to the United States in 1924 Hughes lived in Washington, D.C., and again worked a series of odd jobs while writing poetry. He was working as a busboy at a hotel restaurant in 1925 when he gave some of his poems to the poet Vachel Lindsay. The next day, Hughes read in a newspaper that Lindsay had discovered a Negro busboy poet. Lindsay told Hughes to find a publisher. That same year, Hughes won a poetry prize sponsored by the Urban League. At the award ceremony Hughes was asked by critic Carl Van Vechten if Hughes had enough poems to publish a book. Hughes's first collection of poems, which included "I, Too," was published as The Weary Blues in 1926.

In 1926, Hughes returned to college, enrolling at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. While at Lincoln, Hughes's second collection of poetry, Fine Clothes to the Jew was published in 1927. The same year, Hughes met Charlotte Mason while visiting New York City. She briefly became his literary patron and helped to provide the financial support for Hughes's first novel, Not Without Laughter, which Hughes revised after he graduated from Lincoln in 1929 and submitted for publication in 1930. Hughes won the Harmon Gold Medal in 1931 and a four-hundred-dollar cash prize for this first novel. During this time, Hughes was also working with Zora Neale Hurston on a play that they called Mule Bone. When she submitted the play as her sole work, refusing to share royalties, Hughes broke off his friendship with Hurston.

Hughes's first collection of short fiction, The Ways of White Folks, was published in 1934 and a series of sketches known as his Simple tales, which were about a black Everyman, were published in the Chicago Defender. The Simple tales were very popular with African American readers and were eventually published in a series of books, as Simple Speaks His Mind (1950) and Simple Takes a Wife (1953). Hughes always considered himself primarily a poet. Over the course of his life, more than twenty collections of his poetry were published, including The Negro Mother (1931), The Dream Keeper and Other Poems (1932), Jim Crow's Last Stand (1943), and Montage of a Dream Deferred (1951). In addition to the poetry, drama, novels, and short stories that he created, Hughes wrote two autobiographies and a number of essays. Although his work sometimes received mixed reactions from black individuals who were concerned that he emphasized lower-class life and presented an unfavorable image of his race, Hughes's work was a critical success. He received many writing awards during his life, including a Guggenheim fellowship in 1935, a Rosenwald fellowship in 1941, a National Institute and American Academy of Arts and Letters grant in 1947, and a Spingarn Medal, presented by the NAACP in 1960. Hughes became the first black poet to earn a living through his writing. Hughes died of congestive heart failure on May 22, 1967, at the age of sixty-five. During his lifetime he published nearly fifty books.

[This text has been suppressed due to author restrictions]
Stanza 2

In the second stanza, the narrator begins by defining himself as a brother, albeit the darker brother who is set apart, segregated from his white brother when company visits. The use of the word *brother* is not intended to be read as the literal brother but symbolically, as all men are brothers. All Americans are united as one. The United States welcomes all people to its shores and offers all the opportunity to achieve the American dream. Hughes's poem, however, suggests that not all Americans are given the same opportunity to achieve their dreams. Some—those with dark skin—are cast aside and kept from achieving the dream. Hughes reminds his readers that those people are equal to all others; they are brothers to the white majority.

The second line of stanza 2 refers to more than just being sent to the kitchen to eat. African Americans were victims of Jim Crow laws in the 1920s, when Hughes was a young writer. These laws kept black people separate from white people on public transportation, in restaurants, in theaters, at drinking fountains, and in public bathrooms. Miscegenation laws made it illegal for a black person to marry a white person, and poll taxes and literacy tests kept black Americans from voting. Black children were educated separately from white children. Hughes's reference to being sent to the kitchen when company arrived is intended to represent all of the ways in which blacks and whites were separated in American life during the early twentieth century.

The last three lines of this stanza are a reminder that the darker brothers, who are cast aside, are not defeated. The poet suggests that he uses the time in which he has been segregated to his own advantage. He is able to grow stronger. The second stanza establishes that segregation is still a part of life for many black Americans, but the last lines of the stanza indicate that segregation will not last.

Stanza 3

This stanza begins with only a word. *Tomorrow* is a word filled with hope that the next day will be better than the current one. The first lines of stanza 3 are a promise that the world will change for black Americans. Someday they will not live in segregation, isolated from the rest of human-kind. Someday, whenever that elusive "tomorrow" occurs, black brothers will not be separated from their white brothers. They will all be at the same table, enjoying the abundance that all Americans experience. This is the promise of the American dream, which will someday be enjoyed by all people, black and white.

In the last few lines of stanza 3, the poet issues a warning. There will come a time when no one will cast him aside and when no American will be cast aside because his skin is darker. The poet is issuing a challenge. He is daring anyone who thinks that black people can be cast aside to try and hold him back. He makes clear that when tomorrow arrives and black people are treated as equals, the past cannot then be recalled. Once the dark brother sits at the table, he will not willingly return to the past.

Stanza 4

In stanza 4, the narrator reminds readers that there are additional reasons for giving the black American the equality he deserves. Although the narrator suggests that his beauty provides a reason to end segregation, he is not talking solely about the kind of physical beauty that sets him apart from other people. He is talking about the beauty of existence. There is beauty in life, in living. The poet claims that once white people realize that black people are beautiful, they will be ashamed that they denied black people their equality. This is an optimistic view that all people will regret segregation. The speaker is hopeful that all people will see that each human being deserves life and opportunity.
Stanza 5

The final line of this poem parallels the first line, with only a single word change. The poet is an American. Where the opening line claims that the poet joins his white brothers in singing to celebrate America, in the final lines, the speaker states that he is America. The speaker, an individual, suggests that he also represents all Americans and American values. This final line is a declaration of equality, a resounding claim to equal opportunity to achieve the American dream.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS


THEMES

American Identity

Hughes's poem "I, Too" explores the duality of identity that defined black life in the United States in the 1920s. Black Americans claimed citizenship in a country that denied black citizens the same rights that were provided to white citizens. The poet claims that he is an American and entitled to the same privileges as all other Americans, including the right to eat with Americans of any racial or ethnic background. "I, Too" shows the poet trying to establish his identity through the progress of the poem. In the beginning of the poem, the narrator embraces his right to sing America, the same as all other people who sing to celebrate America. Ironically, his identity as an American grows stronger each time he is cast out of American society. Each time he is excluded, the process reinforces his identity as an American, until he is finally strong enough to demand that he be recognized as an American. By the last line of the poem, the narrator no longer sings of America's greatness; he is America's greatness. He is ready to claim the identity that has been too-long denied him. He is an American.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Writing a response to a poem written by another poet is a common literary activity undertaken by many poets. Hughes's poem is a response to Walt Whitman's poem, "I Hear America Singing." Take the first line of "I, Too" and write a poem of at least fifteen lines that responds to Hughes's poem. Write a brief paragraph to attach to your poem in which you evaluate what your poem says about your identity as an American.
- Read Hughes's poem aloud to yourself and then read it aloud to an audience of friends or classmates. Ask one or two of your friends to read the poem aloud and listen to their voices, noting the inflections of tone as they read aloud. What do you discover about the poem in each of these readings? Does the poem seem to change with different readings? Prepare a one-page reflection paper in which you discuss what you learn about the poem when you hear it aloud.
- Read Whitman's poem "I Hear America Singing" and compare it to Hughes's poem "I, Too." In an essay, compare
such elements as content, theme, tone, syntax, and word choice. In your evaluation of these two works, consider the different approaches of these two male poets. Can these differences be attributed to the historical context of each work or to some other influence?

- Although it is often compared to Whitman's poem, Hughes's poem "I, Too" might also be compared to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech of August 1963. After either reading or listening to King's speech, prepare an oral report in which you discuss the nature of each man's dream for African Americans.
- Research the Harlem Renaissance and write a paper in which you discuss Hughes's literary role in this movement. You may also consider how white Americans responded to the Harlem Renaissance and to Hughes's work, including the role of white patronage in the movement.

**Equality & Inequality**

In Hughes's poem, the poet shares his hope for a future in which all black people will share equally with white people. The poet looks toward a tomorrow in which black Americans will be invited to sit at the table with white Americans and share in the same dreams and opportunities that white people have enjoyed. Hughes is not only demanding equality for all black people, he is demanding that black people no longer be willing to leave the table just for white people to use. The poet envisions a future when all will sit at the same table, when equality will not be a dream but a reality. In stanza 2, when he promises that he will grow stronger, he is rejecting the world as it exists and claiming a world that will exist tomorrow. The "tomorrow" of the poem is still a dream.

*A policeman talks with two young women arrested on trespassing charges at a restaurant in Atlanta in 1962. The women, one white and the other African American, refused to leave when asked by restaurant employees. (AP Images)*
but it is representative of the dreams of a better life that caused so many immigrants to leave their homes and come to the United States. It is the promise of a future in which every person will have the opportunity to live the American dream. This is a tomorrow when all human beings will be recognized as beautiful and equally deserving of life. For Hughes, the dream is still just that—a dream. But he does promise that when he is strong enough, no one will dare to deny him what he deserves: the same chance, the same opportunity, the same equality that all white Americans enjoy.

**Segregation**

In "I, Too" the poet demands that basic rights for all humanity be extended to all people, regardless of skin color. In the second stanza, the poet states that black people are not invited to sit at the same table as their white brothers. Instead, blacks are relegated to the kitchen, where the reader presumes that less important people congregate. The table and the kitchen in the poem are symbolic of the many areas in which blacks and whites are separated. They are separated in restaurants, as the poem suggests, and they are separated on public transportation, in theaters, and in public restrooms.

The table and the kitchen are symbolic of the many areas in which blacks and whites are separated. They are separated in restaurants, as the poem suggests, and they are separated on public transportation, in theaters, and in public restrooms.

African Americans also live in separate neighborhoods and are offered lower-paying jobs. They attend segregated schools and are often subject to violent attacks. All of this segregation is represented by the metaphor of the kitchen. He envisions a future in which all people will sit at the same table. Blacks and whites will attend the same schools and live in the same neighborhoods. The poet goes beyond hoping that tomorrow will be better for black Americans; he proclaims that it will be so. His claim that he is also an American is a call for the end of segregation.

**STYLE**

**Free Verse**

Free verse is verse with no discernable structure, rhyme scheme, or meter. Free verse allows the poet to fit the poetic line to the content of the poem. The poet is not restricted by the need to shape the poem to a particular meter but can instead create a varied or irregular rhythm and syntax, or sentence structure. Free verse is not the same as blank verse, which also does not use a rhyme scheme. Blank verse almost always adheres to iambic pentameter, while free verse relies on line breaks to create a rhythm.

Free verse was a popular style of poetic composition in the twentieth century and it was not uncommon for poets of Hughes's time to compose in free verse. Whitman, to whom Hughes responds in this poem, is sometimes called the father of free verse. There is no pattern of formal rhyme or meter to "I, Too" and, instead, the irregular line breaks give the poem a songlike rhythm that is most pronounced when the poem is read aloud. Over the course of his career, Hughes was renowned for the musicality of his verse. Many of the poems published along-side "I, Too" in *The Weary Blues* are songs.

**Metaphor**

A metaphor is an analogy that identifies one object with another and ascribes to one object the qualities of a second object. A metaphor can also be an object used to represent an idea. The metaphor may be simple, as with a single comparison, or extended, where one object is central to the meaning of the work. For example, the table in Hughes's poem represents status, power, and opportunity, which the darker brother is denied by being relegated to the kitchen. The kitchen represents segregation and lack of opportunity. When blacks sit at the same table as whites, true equality will result.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**
The "New Negro" and the Harlem Renaissance

In March 1925, Howard University professor, Alain Locke coined the term "The New Negro" for a special issue of *Survey Graphic* that emphasized and celebrated the diversity of black life in the United States. Of particular interest to Locke were the many examples of black art, literature, and intellectual thought that heralded a new life for black people and communities. Locke thought that this creative expression was an essential component of a progressive community in which black Americans contributed their talents and would then be recognized as contributing to the formation of one nation. Locke envisioned the "new Negro" as representative of greater self-respect and self-reliance. The new Negro was a black American who contributed to his social and cultural community and for Locke the center of this change was in Harlem.

The influx of southern black Americans into the North included many young and talented writers, intellectuals, actors, musicians, and artists. Many of these talented young black men and women moved into the center of black life in Harlem, the area north of 125th Street in Upper Manhattan. Theater, literature, art, and music that depicted black life flourished. White customers became audiences and patrons, allowing for greater support of black talent. The creation of two major periodicals, *The Crisis*, published by the NAACP and *Opportunity*, published by the National Urban League, provided a forum for the publication of black art, literature, and intellectual opinions. Many black intellectuals thought that the cultural renaissance that was taking place in Harlem would allow blacks to erase many of the false images that had been perpetuated about black life since the end of the Civil War.

The Harlem Renaissance was the first formal literary movement that focused solely on the work of black writers. The literature of this period was a self-conscious exploration of racism and identity, particularly what it meant to be black and an American. This duality of life as an

**COMPARE & CONTRAST**

- **1920s:** An influx of black men and women from the South move north, hoping to create a better life in the industrial cities where there is less segregation. In the 1920s, Harlem, a borough in New York City, becomes the center for black poetry, drama, and music. The decade of artistic growth is known as the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes is a major poet of this movement.

  **Today:** Many of the dance halls and theaters that were associated with the Harlem Renaissance, including the Savoy Ballroom, have been torn down. In their place are churches, grocery stores, and parking lots. The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem maintains photographs and historical documents associated with the Harlem Renaissance that help to recall the way the city used to appear.

- **1920s:** In 1920, Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) holds its national convention in Harlem. The UNIA is the first effort to unite all individuals of African descent into one nation. In 1921, the UNIA negotiates with the government of Liberia to acquire land that will be used by black emigrants from the United States who want to return to Africa. Negotiations for a proposed African American homeland eventually fail.

  **Today:** The UNIA continues to exist as a humanitarian and social organization working for equality and to improve the lives of people of African ancestry.

- **1920s:** Between 1920 and 1925, 225 black Americans are known to have been lynched. The U.S. House of
Representatives passes three anti-lynching bills between 1920 and 1940, but the Senate does not pass any anti-lynching bills during this period.

**Today:** Lynching is extremely rare, though hate crimes, or crimes based on prejudice, still occur. In June 2005, the U.S. Senate apologizes for its failure to ever pass anti-lynching legislation.

- **1920s:** In 1925, Alain Locke, a Rhodes Scholar and Harvard University Ph.D. graduate, publishes an anthology called *The New Negro*. Locke's book examines the diversity of black life in the United States following the influx of southern blacks to large northern cities.

  **Today:** Where Locke was focused on the intermingling of educated, city, rural, and folk black life at the beginning of the twentieth century, black neighborhoods at the beginning of the twenty-first century are more ethnically diverse. In the last decade of the twentieth century, a large influx of African Caribbean immigrants settle in northern cities. In some large cities, the number of Caribbean blacks account for 25 percent or more of the black population.

- **1920s:** On August 8, 1925, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), which claims anywhere from three to five million members in the 1920s, marches down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C. More than forty thousand members of the KKK show up to march in support of white supremacy.

  **Today:** Though far less extensive than it once was, the KKK remains active in the United States and still holds events, including rallies at Gettysburg National Military Park in Pennsylvania; Antietam National Battlefield near Sharpsburg, Maryland; and Harpers Ferry National Historical Park in West Virginia. At these rallies Klansmen are protected by the U.S. Park Police on the basis of the First Amendment's grant of freedom of speech. The KKK closely guards membership information, but it is known that Klan membership has dropped since the 1980s and is believed to consist of fewer than six thousand.

American and as a black American was a common theme of writers during the Harlem Reassurance, as it is in Hughes's poem "I, Too." The speaker evokes the image of two brothers, one white and one black. The dark brother is excluded from the life of the white brother, but the speaker in the poem prophesies that the world is changing and that eventually the dark brother will be equally recognized as an American. Hughes's effort to create two lives within his poem is one of the defining characteristics of the Harlem Renaissance.

Hughes was a principal writer of this period. His writing helped to illuminate the lives of ordinary black citizens and corrected distorted images of African Americans as stereotypical figures in literature and entertainment. The Harlem Renaissance ended shortly after the stock market crash of 1929, but Hughes's contributions to the Harlem Renaissance help to illustrate the important impact of black artists in American society.

### Injustice, Inequity, and Segregation in the United States

The Harlem Renaissance was a result of a great migration of southern blacks to the northern United States. The reasons for this migration were varied. In some cases, African Americans fled to the North because there were greater economic opportunities. These economic opportunities were a result of changes in immigration laws in 1921 and 1924 that severely limited the number of new immigrants allowed into the United States. New immigrants had been a continuing source of cheap labor. With that resource severely limited, northern factories and businesses looked to the southern states for a source of cheap labor. Northern employers needed labor that was close at hand, and southern blacks needed jobs and a place to live in relative safety. Many of these new black migrants were looking for better jobs, housing, and education. In the early twentieth century the American South was a place that offered few opportunities for African Americans. As Hughes noted in
"I, Too," there were two separate Americas for black and white citizens. While the end of the Civil War promised freedom to slaves, the end of slavery did not bring freedom from discrimination, segregation, or racial violence.

After Civil War Reconstruction ended in 1876, many southern states began to create laws, called Jim Crow laws, that segregated African Americans. Sharecropping practices prevented black farmers from owning their own land, while separate school systems kept black children from receiving an education equal to that received by white children. Blacks and whites lived in separate neighborhoods and ate at separate restaurants; they also used separate public drinking fountains and bathrooms. Violence, including lynching, prevented many African Americans from taking action against Jim Crow laws. The emergence of the second Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in the early 1920s (the first KKK had been formed in 1865 by a group of Confederate army veterans) added to the atmosphere of hatred and fear directed against blacks. There was little justice for African Americans in the South, who rarely protested against this discrimination. Even though many black Americans moved north to escape hostility, the North was not free of racial violence. The same fear of outsiders and the competition for jobs that had led to stricter immigration policies in the early 1920s also led to several race riots in northern cities. The KKK was active in the North as well as in the South. In spite of encountering some of the same problems in the North that they had endured in the South, many southern black Americans found greater freedom and less oppression in the northern cities.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

When Hughes's first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, was published in 1926, both the author and his work received a great deal more attention than would be customary for either a young black poet or first book of poetry. In part, the extra attention was due to Hughes winning a 1925 poetry prize sponsored by *Opportunity* magazine for the title poem, "The Weary Blues." The same poem also won a prize offered by *Crisis* magazine. Even more important than these two prizes was the introduction to *The Weary Blues*, written by Carl Van Vechten, an important critic for the *New York Times* and patron of the Harlem Renaissance. Thus, critics at nearly forty newspapers and magazines published reviews of *The Weary Blues*.

Many of these reviews claim that Hughes is "destined to be one of the great poets of his race," in the words of Ruth Peiter, writing for the *Toledo Times* Sunday magazine. Peiter notes that Hughes's poems invoke "many moods," which reflect Hughes's experiences from extensive traveling. Among the varied poems in this first collection are those that "are like a cry from the heart of his race." In his review for the *New York Herald Tribune Books*, critic Du Bose Heyward concurs with other critics, who envision a great future for Hughes. According to Heyward, Hughes captures the rhythms, the mood, and the very essence of jazz in his poetry.

Hughes's ability to turn jazz into poetry is a talent that Corinne Meaux notes in her review, published in the *New York Amsterdam News*, of *The Weary Blues*. Meaux writes that each poem in Hughes's first collection of poetry is like "a brilliant splotch among the riot of colors that blend themselves into Negro life in America." Meaux suggests that Hughes is able to capture Harlem's night life in "jazzy poetry throbbing with syncopated rhythm." Not all reviews in Hughes's day were glowing, however. Writing in the *Boston Transcript*, a critic known only by his or her initials, F. B. B., states that the prize-winning poem, "The Weary Blues" contains the "dominant note that is a mark of the thinking black man, i.e., a touch of tragedy blended with cynicism and a heart tearing melancholy." According to F. B. B., "only a Negro poet can write on mundane subjects and fill his readers with a sense of racial rhythm and melody." While F. B. B. is enthusiastic about the title poem, the critic asserts that "much of the poetry within the volume is crude." "I, Too," according to F. B. B., "strikes a warning note" about what might happen "when the great black tide of American Negroes" surge into "present-day higher civilization." F. B. B. ends by comparing Hughes to Paul Laurence Dunbar, the first African American poet to gain national prominence, at the end of the nineteenth century.

Despite the reservations of some critics like F. B. B., the critics who foresaw future success for Hughes proved to be
prophetic. In celebration of what would have been Hughes's one-hundredth birthday in February 2002, Sue Corbett, writing for the Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service, states that "it is impossible to underestimate the lasting impact of Langston Hughes' work on American letters." In her article, "Langston Hughes: The Gentle Giant of the Harlem Renaissance," Corbett claims that Hughes "brought the literary excellence of black writers to the attention of the world." As Stephen Kinzer notes in his New York Times tribute to Hughes, "For a Poet, Centennial Appreciation," at the centennial celebration of the poet's birth, Hughes was "the first African-American to succeed in making his living as a creative writer and the first to have a literary society devoted to studying his life and work." The Langston Hughes Society was founded in 1981. The following year, in 1982, the University of Missouri Press began publishing The Langston Hughes Review, a journal devoted to the study of Hughes's work.

CRITICISM

Sheri Metzger Karmiol

Karmiol has a doctorate in English Renaissance literature. She teaches literature and drama at the University of New Mexico, and she is also a professional writer and the author of several reference texts on poetry and drama. In this essay, Karmiol discusses the role of poetry, particularly poems like "I, Too," in revealing truth and combating injustice and racism.

Poetry offers readers a multifaceted opportunity to experience the world in a different way. Poetry can create beauty. It can also be witty and entertaining, sometimes even comedic. But perhaps poetry's most important functions are to educate readers about injustice and to rouse readers to actions that can change the world. On occasion, poetry illuminates what is hidden, ignored, or just so distasteful that it is buried in the reader's unconscious mind. Throughout much of the twentieth century, racism was one of those topics that too few people discussed and that far too many people tolerated. Poetry is one tool that can lead to discussions about racism, and perhaps, to change. In his poetry, Langston Hughes is able to depict reality in such a way that readers emerge from their reading of his poetry with knowledge about a world they may not have directly experienced in their lives.

A quick and superficial reading of Hughes's "I, Too" leaves readers with the impression that the poet foresees a time when all Americans will sit together around a table, happy to be at last joined together in a nation in which white and black coexist harmoniously. The truth of the poem is more complex than this and requires that readers carefully consider Hughes's words. They reveal a deeper truth and a warning: once the black narrator has grown strong, whites will no longer dare to exclude him. The joining of black and white people envisioned in the poem is not a willing union, but one that occurs because black Americans will no longer tolerate segregation.

James Finn Cotter claims in his essay "The Truth of Poetry," published in The Hudson Review, that "the truth of poetry is not in reciting facts but in creating veracity." Poetry is not autocratic; rather it must create a reality that readers can locate in the images that the poet produces. This production of reality is even more important for poetry that seeks to expose injustice. Cotter explains that a poem must "be true to itself." A poem must be honest enough to "convince me and to capture my attention with its thought, emotion, imagery, and language." An honest poem leaves the reader feeling changed in some way, having experienced an awakening. An important function of poetry, according to Cotter, is to remind readers of "the injustices and stupidities of small-minded men," who seek to keep other men in their "place." Poetry, then, does more than offer truth; it illuminates injustice and impeaches those who continue to endorse discrimination. This is what Hughes accomplishes in his image of two separate tables, one table defined by privilege and one table defined by injustice. Hughes is not satisfied to know his "place" and promises a fight when he is strong enough to seize what is rightfully his. "I, Too" reveals the truth about ending segregation—that joining together at one table would not be easy, but it would be deserved, as the last
line of the poem promises.

Sidebar: Hide

**WHAT DO I READ NEXT?**

- *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) is Hughes's second collection of poetry. The central subject is Harlem's lower class. Hughes also includes several ballads.
- *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1995) includes 860 poems written by Hughes during his career. The poems are arranged chronologically.
- *The Ways of White Folks* (1934) is a collection of short stories that Hughes wrote after he noted similarities between his writing and that of D. H. Lawrence.
- In *Race, Writing, and Difference* (1985) Henry Louis Gates compiles a number of essays that discuss the role of race in literature.
- Nikki Giovanni's *Racism 101* (1985) is a collection of essays in which Giovanni, a contemporary black poet, writes about what it means to be a black American and how she feels about her experiences with race and racism.
- *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance* (2006), edited by Maureen Honey, is an anthology of women's poetry composed between 1919 and 1939. The poems in this anthology are divided into four sections—Protest, Heritage, Love and Passion, and Nature. Although most readers will find that the poets' names are unfamiliar, their poems complement Hughes's poetry, as these women poets also focus on inequality and lack of opportunity.

When Hughes wrote "I, Too" in the 1920s the world was a long way from ending segregation, but the poet was able to imagine the day when that change would come. In Robert W. Blake's 1990 essay "Poets on Poetry: Writing and the Reconstruction of Reality," published in the *English Journal*, he claims that when a poet creates poetry, he or she "reconstructs reality." The poet uses his or her imagination to create a new reality for the reader. The hope and expectation is that eventually the imagined reality will become a new reality. This is also what Percy Bysshe Shelley argues in *A Defense of Poetry*, first published in 1840, when he claims that poetry does not simply reflect the world, it changes the world. Poetry makes things happen. When Hughes weaves his narrative about merging two separate Americas, one for blacks and one for whites, he is envisioning a future changed and a society created with equality for both races. When, at the end of "I, Too," black and white people sit together at the table, it is in the created world of the poet, one that he insists will align with reality. The creation of a new world is what Shelley emphasizes when he writes of the social importance of poetry, which plays upon the subconscious and thus can transcend ideology and can create "anew the universe," a universe without unjust laws. This is because, for Shelley, poets "are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society." Poetry is more than beauty, much more than just words; it is useful and beneficial to society because it removes distinctions like class, gender, and by extension, race. According to Shelley, a person must possess the ability to imagine the pain of others, to "put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own." Poetry allows readers to feel the pain of the poet—in this case, to experience the anguish of being excluded from the same world in which whites are given privilege and blacks are denied the same opportunities to succeed.

Poetry provides an opportunity for the reader to imagine another world. Hughes creates that kind of opportunity when he allows readers to imagine the pain of being excluded and then to see a tomorrow in which the poet will be included. Shelley claims that for a "man, to be greatly good, [he] must imagine intensely and comprehensively." The poet's ability, as defined by
Shelley, is not only to behold "intensely the present at it is," or as it should be, according to moral laws, but to hold forth the promise of "the future in the present." The poet allows readers to envision a better world, in which an unjust world can be changed, just as Hughes does in "I, Too." Because selfish men are reluctant to change unjust laws, poetry is, as Shelley claims, "never more to be desired than at periods" when "an excess of selfish and calculating principle" exceeds the laws of human nature. It is the poet who fulfills the need for change by creating poetry that illuminates the injustice of the world and the need for a better world. The poet, then, is the bridge from inhumanity to humanity.

The poet's ability to use his art to expose the truth is perhaps his greatest obligation. Poetry is in the unique position of being able to tell the truth, even when the truth might be unpleasant or even dangerous. Not all readers take the time to understand the nuances of poetry; therefore, the poet is sometimes able to cleverly disguise meaning, using the language of poetry. The meaning can be confused and explained away as simply a poem misunderstood. For example, Andrew Marvell did this in his poem, "An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland." Because the ode is a poetic form used to celebrate greatness, it is not immediately clear to the reader that Marvell is being sarcastic in his faint praise of Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of the Commonwealth. The Horatian ode, in particular, is reserved for praising and honoring a great man. However, in this ode Marvell compares Cromwell to Caesar, who was assassinated as a tyrant. Marvell's depiction of the deposed King Charles I, as he meets his death on the scaffold, is one of noble kingship. Cromwell might have been confused about whether Marvell was praising him, but scholars who dissect the poem know that Marvell was doing quite the opposite. Since Marvell did not lose his head over his ode, presumably Cromwell did not probe the poem's truth too closely. In his essay, Blake argues that "poetry is for telling people what they hadn't noticed or thought about before." Poetry brings injustice into public view and exposes the inequities of human existence. Whether in exposing a tyrant for the murder of a king or in exposing prejudice, poets use words, says Blake, to "reveal what people and living creatures are really like." Readers can see the truth and the injustice in Hughes's words. Therefore they can also envision the need to change the world.

In The Defence of Poesy, sixteenth-century poet Sir Philip Sidney defends the work of poets to the Puritan writer Stephen Gosson who, in his 1579 text Schoole of Abuse, argues that poetry is a waste of time, that it is composed of lies, and that it teaches sinful practices. Sidney's response to these claims argues that the role of literature in a civilized society is to educate and to inspire people to undertake ethical and virtuous actions. That is also the hope four hundred years later. Hughes wrote "I, Too" after being denied several opportunities in Genoa, Italy, to board ships bound for the United States. White crews did not want to work with a black man. "I, Too" is a testimony to the need for change, for all humankind to recognize the rights of others. The best way to comprehend this need for change is to visualize a world in which equality is denied. In an essay for the English Journal that argues for the importance of reading modern poetry, Virginia M. Schauble suggests that poetry "can actually be a voice of rare clarity." Poetry allows readers to experience a world they have never known, a world in which people are oppressed and denied basic human rights. In her essay, "Reading American Modernist Poetry with High-School Seniors," Schauble points out that poetry's value "is not merely aesthetic": instead, poetry "speaks a word counter to cultural expectations." It forces readers to think about difference and about changing the world. Poetry creates change and, as Sidney argued so many centuries earlier, it urges readers to ethical actions.

Poetry has an important role in the modern world, just as it did in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries when Sidney and Shelley each argued so eloquently for its worth in their worlds, which were also filled with conflict and injustice. Poetry can teach readers about truth, but it can also teach readers about the difference between right and wrong. Poetry can create the expectation of change and the desire to make that change real. Most importantly, poetry is a way to learn the truth about the world we live in. "I, Too" both reveals injustice and offers the promise of change. As such, the poem inspired black readers in Hughes's day to anticipate the day when they too would join their brethren at the American table. For those who endorsed segregation, it issued a warning that they dare not resist this change.

Jeff Westover

In the following excerpt, Westover analyzes Hughes's struggle with national identity, as evidenced in such poems as "I, Too."

The concept of America is multifaceted in the work of Langston Hughes. In one respect, America's political self-definitions provide the poet with the basis for challenging the status quo and demanding change from the government that supports it. As James Presley puts it, "for Hughes the American Dream … is the raison d'être of this nation" (380). When writing from this perspective, Hughes draws on the ideas behind the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution, and the Bill of Rights in order to criticize racial injustice in both domestic and international arenas. Lloyd Brown makes this argument, writing that

the majority culture's dream of a progressive society based on individual fulfillment and social harmony … has created its own inevitable legacy—that is, the Black American Dream of realizing those dreams and ideals that have been written down for white folks. (17)

Brown develops this argument in the context of his discussion of "Harlem" and other "Dream-poems" by Hughes, but it applies to many others as well. In a similar vein, Donald B. Gibson writes that "Hughes's commitment to the American ideal was deep … and abiding. He held on to it despite his acute awareness of the inequities of democracy, and he seemed to feel that in time justice would prevail, that the promises of the dream would be fulfilled. His early poem "I, Too" (The Weary Blues, 1926) is testimony to his faith" (45). Finally, as Anthony Dawahare argues, in "Let America Be America Again," "the true ‘America’ of the future will embody Jeffersonian political ideals: it will be a nation of, by, and for ‘the people,’ based on the notion of inalienable rights, and free from tyranny" (34).

From another perspective that Hughes also sometimes adopts, however, the United States is a place to be deeply criticized, if not rejected altogether. Hughes expresses his ambivalent attitudes toward his country through the repeated motifs of the Middle Passage, slavery, African American culture, and a diasporan "pan-Africanism." Hughes' work reveals an ongoing conflict between Africa-centered and African-American ideals. As Adam Lively points out, this conflict reflects the immediate context of the period in which Hughes began to write. "The 1920s," he observes, "saw the birth of the idea of blacks as the inside outsiders of modern life" (7). In line with this idea, the poet's reflections on his country and its history are double-tongued, exemplifying the double consciousness W. E. B. Du Bois regarded as constitutive of African-American experience in general. As Raymond Smith puts it, Hughes "could affirm with equal assurance his two credos of identity: 'I am a Negro' and 'I, Too, Sing America.' But while affirming these polar commitments, Hughes was alienated from both of them. As a black man, he was aware that his race had never been granted full participation in the American dream" (270). The political inflections of Hughes' poetic personae, the communal "I" and "we" that he articulates in various ways, reveal the conflict and injustices of American history. In this essay, I reflect upon the fact that Hughes' poetic configurations of "I" and "we" sometimes also refer to a diasporan black community, rather than to the imagined community of the United States, a fact which indicates the complex nature of his national consciousness. In particular, I suggest that it is from his dual vantage as a U.S. citizen and a member of the African diaspora that Hughes criticizes the failures of American democracy and challenges the United States to live up to its founding dream of freedom.

Paul Gilroy's emphasis in The Black Atlantic on the concept of double consciousness provides the point of departure for my analysis of Hughes' writing. Through his concept of a continuum of black culture on both sides of the Atlantic, he extends the idea of double consciousness to the entire African diaspora, arguing that modern blacks simultaneously live both inside and outside the West. For Gilroy, the promise of such dual existence lies in its dialectical potential, for along with the alienation attendant upon the forced displacements of slavery, this habitation in two worlds gives rise to a valuable new perspective:
What was initially felt to be a curse—the curse of homelessness or the curse of forced exile—gets repossessed. It becomes affirmed and is reconstructed as the basis of a privileged stand-point from which certain useful and critical perceptions about the modern world become more likely. (111)

Gilroy's suggestive theorization of black modernity offers a model of double consciousness that points in the different directions of Africa and America at once. In addition, while he persuasively argues on behalf of the African diaspora as a paradigm for black cultural analysis, he also acknowledges the fictionality of such a model, recognizing the conflicts within its widely dispersed communities. This model is useful for understanding Hughes, whose poetry both evokes the African diaspora as a cultural ideal and registers the discrepancies between that ideal and the reality of diasporan disunity. Because Hughes defines the category of the national through recourse to the ideas of Africa and an African diaspora, I focus on his representations of Africa in order to show how they inform, and even constitute, his conceptions of the United States and his place within it. Africa is a necessary term in Hughes' figurations of the nation, and conversely, the category of the nation mediates his relationship to Africa …

Hughes traveled to Africa as a young seaman in 1923 and gained some sense of its colonial domination and of his status as an outsider there. Hughes' story of his encounter with Africans reflects his awareness of Marcus Garvey and his effort to "unify the black world, and free and exalt Africa" (Big Sea 102). In other words, he experienced his first direct contact with Africa within the context of a diasporan consciousness. In the first volume of his autobiography, The Big Sea, Hughes demonstrates the far from idyllic character of that initial interaction, as well as the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the vision that Garvey championed and, on the other, the disunity between black Africans and lighter skinned people of African descent:

"Our problems in America are very much like yours," I told the Africans, "especially in the South. I am a Negro, too."

But they only laughed at me and shook their heads and said:

"You, white man! You, white man!"

It was the only place in the world where I've ever been called a white man. They looked at my copper-brown skin and straight black hair—like my grandmother's Indian hair, except a little curly—and they said: "You—white man." (102-103)

Hughes goes on to point out that one of the Africans, a Kru from Liberia "who had seen many American Negroes, of various shades and colors, and knew much of America," explained their response to him:

"Here … on the West Coast, there are not many colored people—people of mixed blood—and those foreign colored men who are here come mostly as missionaries, to teach us something, since they think we know nothing. Or they come from the West Indies, as clerks and administrators in the colonial governments, to help carry out the white man's laws. So the Africans call them all white men."

"But I am not white," I said.

"You are not black either," the Kru man said simply. "There is a man of my color." And he pointed to George, the pantryman, who protested loudly.

"Don't point at me," George said. "I'm from Lexington, Kentucky, U.S.A. And no African blood, nowhere."
"You black," said the Kru man. (The Big Sea 103)

As Rampersad hints, this and other stories of Hughes' experiences in and offshore Africa reflect the poet's concomitant desire for and alienation from it as his historic motherland. "That he would want to be considered black," Rampersad writes, "struck the Africans as perverse, perhaps even subtle mockery. In vain he protested that he was not white" (1: 78). Hughes' prose account of these interactions with Africans plainly shows the lack of unity between Africans and colored peoples of African descent, but his poems often work against this lack by asserting the reality of a unified African diaspora. This assertion is Hughes' poetic effort to project an imagined community that is at once American and not-American. This metaphorical "dual citizenship" corresponds to Gilroy's redefinition of Du Bois's double consciousness as a uniquely black perspective on the nature of modernity (111).

As Rampersad observes, the Africans' rejection of Hughes as a fellow black "stirred [him] to assert the unity of blacks everywhere, as in his little poem 'Brothers': 'We are related—you and I. / You from the West Indies, / I from Kentucky.' And both were related to Africa." Rampersad characterizes the contradictions between Hughes' desire for Africa and his exclusion from it as "anxiety." I am arguing that this anxiety has both a psychological and sociological dimension to it, and Hughes not only suffers from this anxiety but also sublimates it in the texts of many of his poems. According to Rampersad, for example, Hughes' "anxiety over Africa also inspired" "My People," which was first entitled "Poem" (1: 78):

The night is beautiful
So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.

(Collected Poems 36)

Rampersad's characterization of Hughes' feelings about Africa as "anxiety" points to the political and cultural disunity of the African diaspora at the time such poems were composed. Hughes' relationship to the "we" this poem articulates is a vexed one, for it includes both yearning and alienation. The repeated invocation of "my people" in the poem has two contrasting aspects. On the one hand, the repetition attests to the "anxiety" Rampersad describes, for the poet's insistence on the speaker's membership in the "family of Africa"—understated and gracious though it is—points to a lingering fear that the people of Africa are not really "his" at all. The poet's desire for Africa reflects his corresponding alienation from the United States, which fails to function for him as a definitive homeland. As Kenneth W. Warren puts it, "To be cognizant of oneself as a diasporan subject is always to be aware of oneself no matter where one is, as from elsewhere, in the process of making a not quite legitimate appeal to be considered as if one were from there" (400-1).

On the other hand, Hughes' articulation of "my people" and a sometimes national, sometimes international "we" in a range of poems (including not only "My People" but also "Our Land," "Afraid," "Poem to a Dead Soldier," "Fog," "Prelude to Our Age," "Children's Rhymes," and "A Ballad of Negro History") call that community into being, performing it into existence by constituting the poet's audience as a common body. As a speech act, the poem imagines the diaspora as a viable community, celebrating it as a realistic as well as desirable goal. It presents an alternatively imagined community that offers a sense of belonging, heritage, and pride to African Americans in general. In contrast, in "Afro-American Fragment" Hughes variously evokes communities of black Americans through the plural pronouns we and us and through his remarks to a generalized
Hughes' autobiographical accounts of his reception in Africa and of his fellow seamen's economic deception of native Africans show that his poems praising Africa as the symbol of black unity were deliberate fictions (The Big Sea 108-109). His response may be read as a psychological compensation for the alienation from Africans he must have felt but carefully avoids recording in his autobiography. At the same time, however, the many poems that praise Africa or that imagine links between America and Africa may be interpreted in political terms as the expression of a utopian hope for genuine diasporan unity.


Robert E. Hemenway

In the following excerpt, Hemenway discusses the inspiration for Hughes's poetry and his lack of early success as a writer.

There is no more enigmatic figure in black letters than James Langston Hughes, despite his life-long effort to appear as simple and transparent as his famous urban philosopher, Jesse B. Semple.

Hughes was both radical and conservative, open and closed, a man who constructed an adult personality blending innocent wonder at the world, studied passivity, a profound sense of personal privacy, and a single-minded commitment to a literary career. He was capable of complete sincerity while publishing willful autobiographical falsehoods. A writer who once threw away his books, he loved words, but refused to seek language for his most personal experiences.

Hughes always remained something of a mystery, even to his closest friends. A private door lay just beneath the surface marked "DO NOT ENTER." He retreated there often to fulfill his talent, but he never shared that interior apartment with others. A high school friend heard him read his poems and wrote Hughes: "I like you on that platform, that you which you had never shown us before. You wear a mask so that you can keep that you for work."

The best glimpse of this inner space may come not from poetry, but from psychosomatic illness—Hughes's periodic physical breakdowns at moments of personal crisis. As revealing as these illnesses are, they only give shape to the off-stage turmoil. His deepest emotions never reached center stage in anything other than symbolic form.

Hughes was the most important black poet in the world for most of his life, primarily because at the same time he protected what was within, he could project himself into the feelings of others; his enormous empathy empowered him to articulate people's emotions, especially those inarticulate in the heroism of survival.

As Arnold Rampersad authoritatively argues, in this first volume of a two volume biography, Hughes redefined the standards for poetry and prose written by black authors. He became a revered, almost saintly figure, helpful to young writers, patient and generous to a fault, willing to give his name to any cause which would help the race. Rampersad believes that one source of Hughes's inspiration was a sense of humility, a feeling that his own art was inferior to the collective artistry of black religion and black music. Having lived much of his early life "outside the culture he worshipped," Hughes regretted that "so much of his life had been spent away from consistent, normal involvement with the black masses whose affection and regard he craved."
Hughes had an unhappy childhood, poverty-stricken and virtually abandoned by both his parents, and some of Rampersad's best insights into the private Hughes grow from his imaginative recreation of that boyhood. From his first sentence (written with a stylistic grace characteristic of the entire volume)—"In some respects he grew up a motherless and a fatherless child, who never forgot the hurts of his childhood"—Rampersad brings light to what Hughes held tightly within. Rampersad sees Hughes with "an unappeased hunger" for affection that led to a "chronic unwillingness to vent anger," a "fundamental urge … toward passivity," and a "practiced humility."

The unhappiness of childhood produced a reservoir of emotion that flowed freely to his talent, with the result that Hughes achieved success at a very young age. Rampersad reminds us of just how many "great" Hughes poems—those canonized for decades, such as "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," or "Mother To Son"—were written while he was still a teenager. These poems were widely published in the black community, but it wasn't until the Harlem Renaissance that Hughes attracted notice in the white world as well. Eighteen days after Carl Van Vechten offered to help Hughes place his poetry, The Weary Blues was accepted by Knopf. Hughes was 23 years old, only months away from enrolling as a college freshman.

That so much of Hughes's best poetry was inspired by the hurts of his youth lends credence to Rampersad's assertion that "Langston understood that he needed to be unhappy to write good verse." Rampersad uses this thought as a motif. In 1935, Hughes sought to rejuvenate his verse. Rampersad speculates that "he also knew from bitter experience what he had to do immediately. He needed to retreat; he also needed to feel, like broken bones in his flesh, the twinned pains of isolation and poverty, the forces that shaped his life and his art." I believe Rampersad is correct in this analysis, but some might argue that it is a romantic view of the poet. Certainly the notion that poverty was his inspiration was an idea Hughes resisted. He grew increasingly frustrated by his poverty, and spent most of his life trying to achieve a financial success. One of Rampersad's most revealing reports is the jealousy that Hughes, the "Dean" of Afro-American letters, felt about the royalties which rolled in following Native Son's selection as a Book of the Month. What is admirable here is that Rampersad can see through Hughes's often expressed desire to make money as a writer. Behind that private door, Hughes really did see himself as a romantic figure, a lonely poet who transcended material needs. For example, roaming the Soviet Union as a solitary wanderer, Hughes saw himself fulfilling a romantic vision: "Most of my life from childhood on has been spent moving, traveling, changing places, knowing people in one school, in one town or in one group, or on one ship a little while, but soon never seeing most of them again."

Whatever the ambivalence of his hopes, Hughes's public career had a lack of commercial success. His second volume, Fine Clothes to the Jew, was a better collection, but a commercial failure, partly because of its title. All the Hughes books published prior to 1941 were commercial failures, despite his talent for self-publicity, willingness to personally market them, and a generally positive critical reception. One of the reasons may be Hughes's desire to market his books in the black community at a time when the economy was not structured to support such a market. The one public aspect of Hughes's career which Rampersad leaves for future scholars is the phenomenon of Langston Hughes as a poet, the commodity that his work became.

By the 1930s, Hughes had achieved a different kind of public fame as a radical, a vociferous voice in defense of the Scottsboro Boys, a communist sympathizer who was active in the John Reed Club and president of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, an organization supported by the American Communist Party. He spent a year in Russia praising the Bolshevik Revolution for its lack of racial prejudice, and wrote a number of poems that he would later try to excuse, if not repudiate. One of them, "Good Bye Christ," would lead to the evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson breaking up a book signing party for The Big Sea a decade after the poem was written.

Rampersad makes the argument that Hughes's career as a radical probably diminished his talent, and it seems an assertion supported by the quality of Hughes's work in the thirties, even if one avoids the label, "proletarian doggerel," that his
biographer applies to some of his efforts. The conclusion I draw is that Hughes's radicalism was always a bit superficial, tied to the Left's support for black equality, and grounded in Hughes's love for humanity, particularly for the underdog. One might like to know more about the intellectual rationale, the ideology for his leftist politics, but Hughes was not about to supply it. He had a hatred of injustice and an instinctive identification with the proletariat, but he avoided Marxism as an intellectual regimen. Rampersad reports Hughes's own words, written after the German-Soviet Non-aggression Pact and the end of the Spanish Civil War, suggesting that radical poetry may have been only a career path: "To Noel Sullivan, Hughes presented himself, in a remarkable confession, as using his influence with the left only to ease his way through the Depression. Since poverty seemed to be his lot, 'the only thing I can do is to string along with the Left until maybe someday all of us poor folks will get enough to eat, including rent, gas, light and water.'"

Rampersad generally emphasizes the public Hughes of the radical years, both because Hughes did not communicate his ideology, and also because he acted out his political instincts. Rampersad describes Hughes's presidency of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights—"improbably, Hughes at some point became president of the league"—but Hughes left no evidence which would describe the intellectual commitments that led to such a position. Rampersad's belief is that Hughes's politics were based on human beings in need rather than a dialectical sense of history; it is a conclusion supported by Hughes's life long suspicion of intellectual solutions to human problems. The ideological underpinnings of such a poem as "Put one more 's' in the USA / and make it Soviet," did not play a large part in Hughes's life. He was not comfortable with abstract ideas (Alberta Bontemps claimed he almost never read a book), and although clearly something in Leftist ideology struck a deep chord in the private self, his public actions were seldom given an intellectual defense. It may have been that the Left offered a version of the collectivity, the sense of community, that Hughes saw in black religion and music….


John W. Parker

In the following essay, Parker discusses Hughes's hope for an egalitarian American future in his poem "I, Too."

Carl Van Vechten once referred to Langston Hughes as the "Negro Poet Laureate," and in his introduction to the young poet's first book of poems, The Weary Blues, confessed that he could recall no other person whatsoever who, at the age of twenty-three, had enjoyed so picturesque and so rambling an experience. Hughes's facility in interpreting feelingly and understandingly to themselves and to others the emotional heights and depths of the Negro people has increasingly lengthened his shadow as a man of letters and fastened him unmistakably upon the popular imagination of the American people. Since the publication in 1921 of the poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," his first selection to attract wide attention, Hughes has succeeded as poet, fictionist, essayist, dramatist, and lecturer; and many of his poems and some of his articles and stories have been translated into German, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and Dutch.

Hughes made his appearance upon the literary scene amid the developments which followed in the wake of World War I and witnessed the impact of the depression upon American life and letters. One result of the war was that many Negroes whose experiences had been limited to their own back yards were suddenly snatched up and transported to foreign shores where they witnessed new modes of thinking and of living; and many others left behind straightway forsook the southern cotton fields for the industrial centers of the North and West. To the complex urban problems encountered, many fell prey as flies that seek out the beautiful only to find sure death.

A corresponding change in Negro literature dates from around the 1920's, when a movement popularly known as the "Negro Literary Renaissance" got under way; for one thing, it amounted to a new awakening on the part of the younger
Negro writers themselves; for another, a greater spirit of acceptance on the part of the American whites. Langston Hughes became perhaps the most representative exponent of the new spirit in Negro literature.

Three themes have for the most part engaged Hughes's attention: the primitivistic naturalism of the Harlem dweller, the propagandistic left-wing writing in support of a more articulate proletarian group, and the literature of protest against the social and economic maladjustments of the Negro people. That Harlem should have been the basis of much that Hughes wrote may be explained by the fact that, far more than any other single spot, here were the foreign-born blacks, the carefree Negro from the South, the disappointed Negro veteran back from the war, in fact, the 'melting pot' of Negro culture. Life, at least much of it, was characterized by a spirit of abandon, and it was this emphasis upon the hectic, the coarse, and the sensational that brought Hughes in for many a critical lashing. When in his *Shakespeare in Harlem*, Hughes returned to the Harlem theme, Owen Dodson charged that he was 'backing into the future looking at the past.'

The emphasis of the Negro renaissance came to an end with the change of the decade, and during the years immediately following Hughes devoted much of his effort to a rapidly expanding proletarian movement as is evidenced by such selections as *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), *A New Song* (1938), and *Front Porch* (1939). Likewise, the self-conscious revolt against the American scheme of things is a theme to which the poet recurs. Color prejudice, segregation and discrimination, in fact, the totality of the black man's marginal existence in American life is implied in four lines from *Fields of Wonder*:

Four walls can shelter  
So much sorrow,  
Garnered from yesterday  
And held for tomorrow!

The events of the past two decades have been accompanied by a depressing sense of futility and a loss of faith. Security has seemed nowhere. Today's youth have seen more struggle and chaos and groping in the darkness than any generation of youth in the entire span of our national history. Nor has Hughes escaped the impact of this upheaval; but, while he has been pre-eminently a man of the present, he has maintained a healthful view of the future. The night and the gloom and the darkness have offered a challenge, but never disillusionment.

*Being walkers with the dawn and morning,*  
*Walkers with the sun and morning,*  
*We are not afraid of the night,*  
*Nor days of gloom,*  
*Nor darkness—*  
*Being walkers with the sun and morning.*

But Hughes's view of a new day for his people, somehow inevitable in the nature and in the trend of things, is not always a clear one; frequently it is beclouded by a "weariness that bows me down," a "dream that is vague and all confused." Recalling the injured pride and the pent-up emotions of the porter at the railroad station, Hughes asks defiantly,

*Must I say*  
*Yes, Sir*
To you all the time.

Yes, Sir!
Yes, Sir!

All my days?

Doors closed permanently, and hence a meaninglessness to the black man's striving is the definition of the situation in which Jamie
sits on a hill
Looking out to sea
Toward a mirage-land
That will never be.

Loss of faith, however, is a temporary condition. Before long the poet regains perspective and sees, if but imperfectly, the new order being carved out of the old. In "Park Bench," as in "Porter," he continues in the vein of the "Crusader," as Verna Anery once labeled him; for here he makes a savage thrust at the wealthy class on Park Avenue and offers a sober warning that the new awakening which is settling upon the Negro people may subsequently find expression in a change of the mores:

But I'm wakin' up!

Say ain't you afraid

That I might, just maybe,

In a year or two

Move on over

To Park Avenue?

Although he writes mainly concerning his own people, Hughes has proceeded on the sound assumption that the so-called Negro problem is not an isolated one but a single segment of a complex American culture. Color prejudice moves hand in hand with race prejudice and religious prejudice, and, despite the artificial line that divides them, humble folk of all races face a common lot; their children in the swamps of Mississippi as in the orange groves of California, weary and disillusioned, march toward a common destiny. "The Kids Who Die," to which a Darwinian note attaches, is disarmingly forthright:

But the day will come—

You are sure yourself that it is coming—

When the marching feet of the masses

Will raise for a monument of love,

And joy, and laughter,

And black hands and white hands clasped as one

And a song that reaches the sky—
The song of the new life triumphant
Through the Kids that die!
Complete assurance that "America will be" and that black and white will some day look neither up nor down but across at each other is implicit in lines from the poem "I, Too":

Tomorrow,
I'll [be] at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me
"Eat in the Kitchen"
Then.

Although increasingly, as Fields of Wonder reveals, Langston Hughes has written on a variety of topics, it is true that in the main he has followed the course of the "social poet": he has been concerned not so much with moonlight and roses, sweetness and light, as with "whole groups of people's problems"—poverty, the ghetto, trade-unions, color lines, and Georgia lynchings. But, like Chesnutt, Hughes has stored no hate in his soul, nor has he descended to the level of the propagandist. His healthy view of the tomorrows yet to be is an outgrowth of his faith in the essential goodness of the human heart and hence the ultimate flowering of the democratic way of life in America.


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[This text has been suppressed due to author restrictions]


"Race Riots, Lynching, and Other Forms of Racism in the 1920s," in *E Pluribus Unum: America in the 1170s, 1850s, and 1920s*, (accessed July 21, 2008).

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Sidney, Sir Philip, Defence of Poesy, Ginn, 1898, pp. 49-52.


FURTHER READING


This book examines social class and status and how the diversity of black life is defined by the artists and authors who depict black life. The author is particularly interested in African American folk culture and its effect on black identity.


This book provides a comprehensive and easy-to-access history of African Americans from their lives in Africa, through slavery in the United States, and to life after slavery. The authors discuss discrimination in housing, education, and employment, as well as the contributions made by black Americans during war.


Morrison edited and wrote the introduction to this text, which is a collection of nineteen essays that deal with several aspects of African American identity, civil rights, equality, and the public perception of race and gender equality. These essays explore important ideas about equality for black men and women, as well as illustrate that race and equality in the United States remain complex issues for discussion.


This illustrated book includes a collection of essays that examine the life and work of the actors, artists, musicians, and authors whose work is identified as originating from the Harlem Renaissance.

The author explores how children learned the unwritten and carefully socialized rules of segregation. It also explores how the differences between public and private behaviors were defined during this period of American history.


This book provides a provocative look at race relations in the United States. The focus is on how African Americans view themselves and how they perceive themselves in the eyes of others. Some of the topics covered include black pride, black intolerance, and racism.


This text is a collection of West's essays exploring a number of issues that are important to many African Americans, including affirmative action, black leadership, and the legacy of civil rights activist Malcolm X.

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