

Poetry
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Langston Hughes

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Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

- Historical and Literary Context
- Langston Hughes
- “I, Too”
- “Harlem”
- “Cross”
- Analysis



Hello. Let us look at the poetry of Langston Hughes in this lecture. To begin with, we will see the historical and literary context, examine his life briefly, then read three of his poems, “I, too,” “Harlem” and “Cross,” offer a linguistic and rhetoric analysis of all these poems and then conclude.

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Historical and Literary Context

- The Two World Wars (1914-1918) and (1939-1945)
- The Great Depression in 1929
- Employment and economic opportunities for the blacks
- **Harlem**: a three square mile neighborhood in New York City
- The Great Migration: the African Americans from the South to the North for freedom and opportunities
- Black artists, intellectuals, writers, musicians
- **The Harlem Renaissance** (1919-1929): revival of African American literature and arts
- Reclamation of identity and pride as African Americans
- Initiated by writers like Countee Cullen and **W. E. B. Du Bois**
- Harlem Renaissance poets: **Langston Hughes**, Claude McKay, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Anne Spencer, Jean Toomer, and Zora Neale Hurston
- Influenced the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements



As in the case of many other poets, Langston Hughes also had similar background. The two world wars had affected people in the US and rest of the world. Similarly, the Great Depression also affected the common people. Normally, African Americans would have lot of difficulties during this time. Some of these African Americans lived in a place called Harlem. It is a three-square mile neighbourhood in New York City. Many African Americans came to New York City or to the North in general to get employment and educational opportunities. That is why we call this 'the Great Migration of the African Americans from the South to the North for freedom and opportunities.' Many African American artist, intellectuals, writers, musicians, they came together and then, came up with this 'Harlem Renaissance.'

This Harlem Renaissance was an attempt to revive African American literature and arts in America. This was a movement specifically popular in this period 1919 to 1929. The main aim of this movement was to reclaim identity and pride as African Americans. This was initiated by writers like Countee Cullen and W. E. B. Du Bois.

We have many poets from this group, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, George Douglas Johnson, Anne Spencer, Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston. Later on, these poets had some influence on the civil rights movement and Black Arts Movement.

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Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

- Considered a 'poet laureate' of the African Americans
- Exploited the traditions of Blues and Jazz in his poetry
- Performed his poems with/ without musical instruments
- Recorded his voice for listening to poems by posterity
- Easily accessible and simple but not simplistic poet
- Practiced simplicity by hard work and experiments
- Authored some major volumes of poetry:
 - The Weary Blues* (1926)
 - Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951)
 - Ask Your Mama* (1961)
 - The Panther and the Lash* (1967) - posthumous
- Popular poems include "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "I Too," "Harlem," "Cross"



Now, let us see Langston Hughes. He was born in 1902 and died in 1967. He was considered a 'poet laureate' of the African Americans. He exploited the traditions of blues and jazz in his poetry for the first time in American culture. He performed his poems with and also without

musical instruments. He also recorded his own voice for listening to poems by posterity. His poems are easily accessible and simple, but not simplistic.

He practiced simplicity by hard work and experiments. He authored many volumes, some of them are here: 'The Weary Blues,' 'Montage of a Dream Deferred,' 'Ask your Mama,' 'The Panther and the Lash,' which was published after his death. He has many popular poems; we have some listed here. The Negro Speaks of Rivers, this was one of his earliest poems, I Too, Harlem and Cross are the three poems that we will discuss now.

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I, Too

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When **company comes**,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

5



They are short poems. Let us begin with I, too.

“I, too, sing America,

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

when **company comes**,

but I laugh

and eat well,

and grow strong.”

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I, Too



Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When **company comes**. 10
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides, 15
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.



Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When **company comes**.
Nobody 'll dare
say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed-
I, too, am America.

This nation, America, is characterized by this peculiar, racial problem between whites and African Americans. That is why we have a poem like this. This poem immediately evokes Walt Whitman, Walt Whitman as an American poet was singing of America and now, Langston Hughes also says I too, sing America, I too, am America.

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Thematic Contrast



- Dark and Light
- Ugliness and Beauty
- I and They
- Marginal and Mainstream society
- African-American and White American
- Identity and Difference
- Spatial and Psychological
- The question of racial discrimination and the oppression of the African-American is the key.



Let us see the thematic contrast between dark and light, ugliness and beauty, I and they, marginal and mainstream society, African American on one hand and White American on the other hand. Essentially, it comes to this basic problem of identity and difference, which is shown in real life through spatial and psychological differences. The question of racial discrimination and the oppression of the African American is a key problem addressed in this poem.

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Poetic Devices



- It is a poem of a lived experience not of technical craft.
- Images of eating in the kitchen and in the dining hall
- Simple declaration but a powerful expression of a complex experience
- The command of “eat in the kitchen”
- The self-assertion of self-esteem and self-acceptance
- The strategic shift from a singer of America to an American
- Discrimination is psychological destruction.
- Poetic creation is mental preservation and social progress.
- An example of Black Aesthetic



When it comes to the poetic devices, we can see that it is a poem of a lived experience and not of technical craft. Images of eating in the kitchen and in the dining hall, we can see. Simple declaration is what we have in the whole poem, but it is a powerful expression of a

complex experience. There is a command “eat in the kitchen.” The self assertion of self esteem and self acceptance is what is important in the whole poem.

There is a strategic shift from a singer of America to an American. The poem highlights the discrimination which is psychological destruction. That is why many Black Americans could not have faith in themselves. They could not have self confidence. The poetic creation is actually mental preservation and social progress, this is an example of Black Aesthetic of this Harlem Renaissance.

The poetic devices that we could see in other poems, other poets, we may not see here. Perhaps we have some of them in other poems by Langston Hughes, but here, what is important is the lived experience of the poet.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



- No conventional rhyme, rhythm or meter in the poem.
- But the poet sings America and becomes America as seen in the first and last lines.
- Lines vary in length from a single-syllabled line (“then,” 14) to a nine-syllabled line (“They send me to eat in the kitchen,” 3)
- A variety of rhythms
 - When company comes, [iamb: one short & one long]
 - But I laugh, [anapest: two short & one long]
 - And eat well, [bacchius: one short & two long]
 - And grow strong.
 - Nobody’ll dare, [dactyl: one long & two short]
 - Say to me



When it comes to rhyme, rhythm and meter, we have certain observations. There is no specific conventional rhyme or rhythm or meter in the poem, but the poet sings America and becomes an American as seen in the first and last lines. Lines vary in length from a single syllabled line “then” to a nine syllabled line “they send me to eat in the kitchen” We have a variety of rhythms. That is why Langston Hughes is important for American poetry, for African American poetry. He mixed the traditional music forms of African American life called Blues and Jazz. Here, we have some examples where we have various rhythmic patterns, Iamb, anapaest, bacchius, dactyl:

“When company comes, [iamb: one short & one long]

But I laugh, [anapest: two short & one long]

And eat well, [bacchius: one short & two long]

And grow strong.

Nobody 'll dare, [dactyl: one long & two short]

Say to me.”

We have indicated the meaning of this iamb, anapaest, bacchius and dactyl. And also underlined the words where we have this stress. So, ‘when company comes’ is an example of iamb, where we have one short and one long syllable. Then we have ‘but I laugh,’ where we have, ‘but.’ ‘I,’ these two are not stressed, and the last one that is stressed, that is a long one. And ‘eat well,’ here again, we have one short and two long that is stressed syllables.

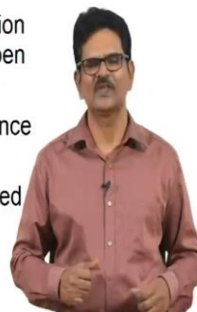
Again, we have the same structure ‘and grow strong.’ Then lastly, we have dactyl, where we have one long that is stressed one ‘nobody will dare’ then two short forms ‘say to me,’ ‘say’ is stressed and ‘to me,’ they may not be stressed. So, we have dactyl again. This kind of variety of rhythmic metrical format, we have in Langston Hughes poem.

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Overall Impression



- “I too” is a poem of self-assertion and identity establishment.
- It sings of claiming a social and political space for a marginalized section of the African Americans in the US.
- The marginal space of kitchen is juxtaposed with the central space of the dining table as a marker of discrimination.
- The poem discusses a social problem and offers a solution through a powerful image rather than offering it as an open solution.
- Langston Hughes attempts to maintain the delicate balance between pure art and an art with a social responsibility.
- The key idea is “the personal is political” for the oppressed



To give an overall impression, “I Too” is a poem of self assertion and identity establishment. It sings of claiming a social and political space for a marginalized section of the African Americans in the US. The marginal space of kitchen is juxtaposed with the central space of the dining table as a marker of discrimination. The poem discusses a social problem and offers a solution through powerful image rather than offering it as an open solution.

Langston Hughes attempts to maintain the delicate balance between the pure art and an art with a social responsibility. The key idea is “the personal is political” for the oppressed. Thus, we have this overall impression of this poem.

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Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run? 5
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load. 10

Or does it explode?



Let us move on to the second poem, Harlem. It is again a short poem:

“What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore

and then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over,

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

This is a short poem and it is a different poem from the previous one.

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Thematic Contrast



- Dream and Reality
- Deferral and Gratification
- Healthy and Unhealthy
- Sweet and Bitter
- Light and Heavy
- Question and Answer
- Harlem and White Neighborhoods



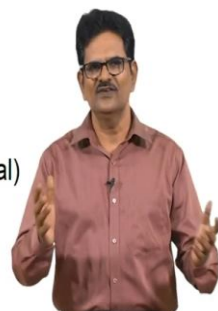
We have a thematic contrast between dream and reality, deferral and immediate gratification, healthy and unhealthy life, sweet and bitter taste, light and heavy structure, question and answer, then most importantly, the racial problem, Harlem and White neighbourhoods.

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Poetic Devices



- **Rhetorical Question:**
What happens to a dream deferred? (1)
- **Simile:** dry up/ like a raisin in the sun? (3)
fester like a sore? (4)
stink like rotten meat? (6)
like a syrupy sweet? (8)
sags/ like a heavy load? (10)
- **Question:** or does it explode? (11)
- **Ambiguity:** a heavy load (weight or explosive material)




We have quite a few poetic devices in this poem, here we can see that, Langston Hughes can also write poems using lot of devices. We have a rhetorical question in ‘what happens to a dream deferred?’ there is no answer. We have a number of similes as listed here: dry up like a raisin in the sun, fester like a sore, stink like rotten meat, like a syrupy sweet, sags like a heavy load.


Then we have another important question ‘or does it explode?’ Does the dream explode? That is where we have this kind of oppression and explosion of anger going together. The last one, we have ambiguity, ‘a heavy load,’ what is that heavy load? Is it emotional load or something more explosive material?

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter



- **Rhyme:** end rhymes not systematic, but frequent
- **Rhyming words:** sun & run (3, 5)
meat & sweet (6, 8)
load & explode (10, 11)
- **Meter:** iamb with variations, e.g. trochee, dactyl
 - Does it dry up ➤ (trochee)
 - like a raisin in the sun?
 - Or fester like a sore
 - And then run? (dactyl)
- **Enjambment:** dry up/ like a raisin in the sun



We have some rhyme, but it is not systematic, but frequently we have like: sun and run, meat and sweet, load and explode. We also have meter with iamb and with variations. Trochee and dactyl are also found in this poem. We have enjambment that we have indicated here, does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore and then run? We have this trochee in the first one and dactyl in the last one. Lastly, we have this enjambment separately here, dry up like a raisin in the sun.

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Overall Impression

- Harlem is a short poem of 11 lines with a heart-breaking question, "What happens to a dream deferred?"
- The dream is social justice in a democratic country.
- Despite the American Dream, the African-Americans have faced numerous challenges in joining the mainstream society.
- The common images of dried up raisin, festured sore, rotten meat, crusted syrupy sweet, and sagging heavy load bring to sharp focus the problems of the socially and economically oppressed people.
- The last image of explosion is powerful to draw the attention of the reader to a different perspective.
- Mutual accommodation is good for the whole society.
- The volcano of injustice can explode any time.



We have the overall impression of this poem here. Harlem is a short poem of 11 lines with a heart-breaking question, "what happens to a dream deferred?" How long will the black people wait for freedom? That is the question. Their dream of freedom, when is it going to be realized? is the question. The dream is social justice in a democratic country. Despite the great American Dream, the African Americans have faced numerous challenges in joining the mainstream society. The problem still persists in the US.

The common images of a dried-up raisin, festured sore, rotten meat, crusted syrupy sweet and sagging heavy load bring to sharp focus the problems of the socially and economically oppressed people, in a large democratic country like the US. The last image of explosion is powerful to draw the attention of the reader to a different perspective.

How long will the people be oppressed like this? One day, they will express their anger, that is how this civil rights movement took place in the US. Mutual accommodation is good for the whole society. The volcano of injustice can explode any time. It is simmering, it is always there. One has to manage society well with this political or governmental order, proper order for all kinds of people.

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Thematic Contrast



- Young and Old
- Black and White
- Curse and Blessing
- Evil and Good
- Shack and Big House
- Death and Life
- Blackish White and Whitish Black
- Racial discrimination crosses boundaries for joys and sorrows.



Naturally, we have this thematic contrast between young and old, black and white, curse and blessing, evil and good, shack and a thoughts house and big a house, death and life, blackish white and whitish black that is an actual cross, racial interbreeding, then we have this racial discrimination which crosses boundaries for joys and sorrows.

All people have similar joys and sorrows. Maybe black, maybe white, does not matter. But all of them have these similar feelings even for people who have mixed blood, they also have similar feelings. That is why we say racial discrimination crosses boundaries for joys and sorrows of all people.

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Poetic Devices



- No explicit poetic devices but special uses of language in a meditative and interrogative mode
- The title **Cross** is resonant with **suffering**.
- Statements and Conditionals
- Regrets and Wishes
- Fears and Confusions
- A physical fusion without social cohesion
- The cross of Christ: suffering and redemption
- The cross of Cross breed: endless suffering
- Why the cross?
- Why no responsibility?



We do not have any explicit poetic device in this poem, but we notice some special uses of language in a meditative and interrogative mode. The title Cross is resonant with suffering. Cross, the religious symbol is also at the background of this poem. We have statements and conditionals, regrets and wishes, fears and confusions, actually we have a physical fusion without social cohesion.


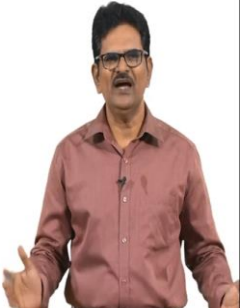
The Cross of Christ refers to the suffering and redemption of the people but the cross of cross breed has endless suffering. We can ask this question, why the cross? That is Why is this suffering? Then we can ask next question, why is there no responsibility for the actions of this kind of crossing over? Who takes the responsibility? The individuals or the society? That is a big question in front of us.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

- **Rhyme:** The lone pair of rhyming words hell and well seems to answer the question, “what is life?” with “well, it is hell.”
- **Repetition:** Words like man, and black are repeated to emphasize the human condition of being black and cross.
- **Rhythm:** Iambic
- **Meter:** predominantly trimeter

I take | my cur | ses back. (3 feet)
If ever | I cursed | my black | old mo | ther (4 feet)
And wished | she were | in hell, (3 feet)
I'm so | rry for | that e | vil wish (4 feet)
And now | I wish | her well. (3 feet)

We have a pair of rhyming words in hell and well to answer the question, what is life? Is it well? Is it hell? So, the answer is well, it is hell. We have some repetitions in words like man and black, which are repeated to emphasize the human condition of being black and also Cross. We have this iambic rhythm and the meter is predominantly trimeter. We can see this in this extract:

“I take my curses back
if ever I cursed my black old mother
And wished she were in hell,
I am sorry for that evil wish

and now I wish her well”

Many thoughts, evil thoughts come to the speaker, because of the kind of suffering that he has, but he learns to forgive, he learns to live with the given situation.

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Overall Impression

- The titular cross is a social symbol of black cross-breed suffering in the US.
- The poem articulates an in-between state of mind indicating a sense of alienation of the speaker.
- The arrangement of lines and non-use of specific poetic devices reveal the identity crisis of the speaker; neither traditional nor experimental, neither prose nor poetry, neither black nor white.
- The disadvantage of the African American woman is a double marginalization and the cross child's is much worse.
- Hughes's poetry is a poetry with a social cause.



Now, we have this overall impression here. The titular cross is a social symbol of black cross breed suffering in the US. It is not that people mix up physically, and have children, inter racially, they also create suffering inter racially. That is the whole idea of this. The poem articulates and in between state of mind indicating a sense of alienation of the speaker.

The arrangement of lines and non use of specific poetic devices reveal the identity crisis of the speaker; neither traditional nor experimental, neither prose nor poetry, neither black nor white. The disadvantage of the African American woman is a double marginalization and the cross child's is much worse.

Hughes's poetry is a poetry with a social cause. As we have seen in all these poems. Perhaps, this is a case with all African Americans. They cannot be worried about aesthetic alone, they have to worry about justice, they have to worry about their living conditions. They used poetry They used poetry as a means to express themselves.

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Summary

- Historical and Literary Context
- Langston Hughes
- “I, Too”
- “Harlem”
- “Cross”
- Analysis
- “Poetry is the human soul entire squeezed like a lemon or a lime, drop by drop into atomic words.”
— Langston Hughes



To give a summary of this discussion, we have looked at the historical and literary context in which Langston Hughes was writing in the Harlem Renaissance period. He was an African American poet and joined other poets and he was able to articulate his own feelings about being an African American in America.

As a poet, he used jazz music and this blues music in his poems. That is why he performed his own poems in front of people in many places. He was able to draw huge gatherings and later on, he also recorded his performances and made them available for posterity. The poetic analysis and the rhetorical analysis of this poem tells us that he does not use many of the poetic devices in all the poems. Of course, he does in one or two poems like this Harlem. His feeling is there, his expression is there, his feelings and expression about the suffering of African Americans is there. That is what this poetry is all about. Poetry is a human soul entire squeezed like a lemon or a lime, drop by drop into atomic words. This is what Langston Hughes says about poetry. So, we have this human soul squeezed in atomic words in the poetry of Langston Hughes.

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We have some references for you. Whenever possible please look into these references for further learning. Thank you!