



I, Too, Sing America

by Langston Hughes

Content Synopsis

The poem “I, Too, Sing America” by Langston Hughes is inspired by and in response to Walt Whitman’s famous poem, “I Hear America Singing.” Whitman’s poem, in one unified stanza, celebrates working Americans in all their differences. In five halting stanzas, Hughes’ poem addresses the social inequality that is predicated on race in America. The speaker of “I, Too, Sing America” says that he also celebrates America, but since he is the “darker brother,” he is forced to eat in the kitchen segregated from everyone else. Even though the speaker is excluded, he laughs and grows strong looking forward to the future when he will “be at the table when company comes.” He is confident that someday people will see how “beautiful” he is and be ashamed of their previous prejudice. The single-line final stanza highlights the speakers’ refusal to be forgotten through the statement, “I, Too, am America.”

Symbols & Motifs

Hughes plays off Whitman’s reference to America singing in “I, Too, Sing America.” The speaker in Hughes’ poem is also singing; although he is forced to do it from the kitchen. The kitchen serves as a metaphor to demonstrate the segregation and exclusion that Blacks were subjected to in the first half of the 20th century. The speaker has hope and faith, however, that tomorrow will be better and, “nobody’ll dare say to me, ‘eat in the kitchen’

then.” The poem’s sentiment is anticipation for the day when African Americans will be treated as equal to white men, with everyone eating together.

Historical Context

Langston Hughes’ success coincided with the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance; a time when African Americans were thriving in the fields of art, music and literature. During the 1920s, black artists were achieving wide spread recognition for the first time. At this time, performers such as Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith played for black and white audiences alike in Harlem nightclubs. Harlem became a cultural hub where writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes migrated to in efforts to immerse themselves in the thriving community of arts and letters. As more and more Blacks moved north, the art of the Harlem Renaissance evolved, addressed more urban topics, and focused on social injustice.

Societal Context

Langston Hughes was an outspoken advocate for the rights of Blacks. Before Hughes returned to the U.S. from Europe in the early 1920s, he was denied passage on a ship because of his race (Poetryarchive.com). “I, Too, Sing America” was written out of anger and the general frustration at the slow progress from slavery to equality. During the 1920s, the Black population in the North nearly doubled and doors

were opening, but segregation was still in full effect. The Ku Klux Klan had a large following and lynchings were still occurring at an alarming rate (“The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow”). While conditions were better for Blacks in the North, they were far from perfect. Racism pervaded overcrowded cities and job prospects were scarce. Many Blacks fought for the lowest paying, least desirable jobs because they were denied better opportunities (“The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow”). The Jim Crow era was still largely in effect across the country. Hughes said, “From a whole race of people freed from slavery with nothing . . . it has not always been . . . but the Negro people believed in the American Dream . . .” (Poetryarchive.com). Hughes acknowledged that society had come a long way since slavery but urged people to realize that there was still a long way to go.

Religious Context

“I, Too, Sing America” does not have a specific religious context.

Scientific & Technological Context

“I, Too, Sing America” does not have a specific scientific or technological context.

Biographical Context

Langston Hughes was born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri to an abolitionist family (Jackson). He started writing poetry in the eighth grade, but was encouraged by his father to study engineering (Jackson). He attended Columbia University briefly but dropped out to pursue a career as a writer. He was an avid reader and admired poets such as Walt Whitman, Edgar Lee Masters, and Carl Sandburg (Simes and Wahlgreen 760).

His first poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” was published in *Brownie’s Book* (Jackson). Other early poems were published in the magazine “Crisis” which was run by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (Poetryarchive.com). He traveled to Africa, Russia, and

Europe on a freighter in 1923, moved to Harlem in 1924, and found inspiration in the clubs where he would listen to jazz and blues music (Jackson). He moved to Washington D.C. for a year in 1925 and met poet Vachel Lindsay at a restaurant where Hughes was bussing tables (Simes and Wahlgreen 760). He left a few of his poems at Lindsay’s table and Lindsay liked them so much that he read them at a public reading that night; an event which made Hughes a minor celebrity for a time (Simes and Wahlgreen 760).

In 1926, Hughes’ first book of poetry, “*The Weary Blues*,” was published and he moved back to Harlem. His poetry embraced the Black experience and often imitated jazz and blues music. Later in his life, he wrote poems specifically to be accompanied by jazz music (Simes and Wahlgreen 760). Hughes died from cancer in 1967. He had a successful career for over 40 years during which he published poetry, short stories, scripts, plays, and autobiographies (Jackson). He is the first black person known in the United States to support himself solely through his writing.

Jennifer Bouchard, M.Ed.

Works Cited

- _____. *African American Poetry*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Globe Book Company, 1993.
- Hughes, Langston. “I, Too, Sing America.” *Elements of Literature: Fifth Course, Literature of the United States*. Austin: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 2003. 740.
- Jackson, Andrew. “Langston Hughes.” *Red Hot Jazz*. 26 March 2008. <<http://www.redhotjazz.com/hughes.html>>.
- Sime, Richard and Bill Wahlgreen, eds. *Elements of Literature: Fifth Course, Literature of the United States*. Austin: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 2003. 760-763.
- _____. The Poetry Archive. *Langston Hughes*. 2005. 14 April 2008. <<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoem.do?poemId=1552>>.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the tone of the poem?
2. Who are “they” in the poem?
3. How does Hughes use metaphor to express his hopes and frustrations?
4. How will life be different for the speaker “tomorrow”?
5. How are the first and last lines of the poem different?
6. Why might it be useful to have two people write about the same topic?
7. Do you think that Hughes’ poem is more complementary or more oppositional to Whitman’s poem?
8. How might a contemporary black poet write about this topic today?

Essay Ideas

1. Read more poetry by Langston Hughes and write an essay in which you analyze his poetic style, themes, and structure.
2. Write an essay in which you compare and contrast the poetry of Langston Hughes to the poetry of Walt Whitman.
3. Explore visual art produced during the Harlem Renaissance such as the paintings of Aaron Douglas or the photographs of James Van Der Zee and compare to the poetry of Langston Hughes.
4. Research the Harlem Renaissance and write an essay analyzing why it ended and generalize how the Harlem Renaissance contributed to the future Civil Rights Movement.
5. Write your own poem in which you express your frustration at being left out or excluded.

Copyright of Introduction to Literary Context: American Poetry of the 20th Century is the property of Salem Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.