

"Refugee in America"

Author: Langston Hughes

Date of birth: February 1, 1902

Place of birth: Joplin, Missouri

Date of death: May 22, 1967

Place of death: New York City, New York

Country: United States

Culture: African American

Type of poem: Lyric

Appears in: *Fields of Wonder*, 1947; *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 1995

American poet Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, but spent most of his life in New York City. He was a major figure in the Harlem Renaissance, an influential group of black intellectuals, artists, and writers in Harlem, New York, in the 1920s that included novelist Zora Neale Hurston, the author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and Richard Bruce Nugent, an openly gay writer and painter. The Harlem Renaissance formed in part due to the influence of W. E. B. Du Bois's "talented tenth," a term for highly educated black elites. However, the members of the Harlem Renaissance wanted to portray the African American experience in all of its complexity. As Hughes wrote in his famous essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" in 1926: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too."

The Harlem Renaissance gave birth to subsequent artistic movements that offered critiques of their forebears (particularly Hughes), but it is important to acknowledge that this was the intellectual soil from which Hughes's work sprang. He wrote about the lives of ordinary people. He also wrote about what it was like to be black in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, and how racial injustice permeated all aspects of life. Hughes published his first poetry collection, *The Weary Blues*, in 1926. The poem "Refugee in America" was first published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1943. It was published in the collection *Fields of Wonder* (1947) and subsequently retitled "Words like Freedom." A number of Hughes's poems, such as "Dreams" and "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," remain some of the most familiar in the American canon. Another famous

poem, "Harlem," commonly known as "A Dream Deferred," from 1951, inspired Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959).

"Refugee in America" can best be described as a lyric poem because the narrator speaks in the first person. It is composed of two four-line stanzas in which the second and fourth lines rhyme. It concerns the meaning of two words: "freedom" and "liberty." To begin to unpack the poem, one must situate it within its historical context. As noted above, the "Refugee in America" was first published in 1943, in the midst of World War II. Hughes was vocal about the great irony of the war; Although black American soldiers were risking their lives serving in segregated forces, they had never fully enjoyed the freedom and liberty that they were called upon to defend.

"Refugee in America" is not Hughes's most political poem, nor does it reach the fiery heights of "Let America Be America Again," a Walt Whitman-esque, socialist plea from 1935. In that poem, Hughes not only uses repetition (a familiar device in Hughes's work), but a specific kind of rhetorical repetition, popular with Whitman, called anaphora:

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,

I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.

I am the red man driven from the land (19–21)

But more pertinent to "Refugee in America," the poem "Let America Be America Again" offers two contrasting images of a country. In the opening lines of the long poem, he writes:

Let America be America again.

Let it be the dream it used to be.

Let it be the pioneer on the plain

Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.) (4–5)

The parenthetical reinforces the invisibility of his experience. "Refugee in America" and "Let America Be America Again" are quite different but showcase similar techniques. "Refugee in America" also uses repetition; the first line in each stanza is constructed in the same way, "There are words like." It also offers two contrasting images: one of joy and one of pain. In the first stanza, Hughes celebrates the word "freedom." Freedom might have been on a lot of lips during World War II, but Hughes's use of the word refers to African Americans' emancipation from slavery. In the second paragraph, the hammer falls. One could mistakenly assume that the words freedom and liberty are synonyms, but

Hughes knows better, remarking "If you had known what I knew" (7). He might have his literal freedom from bondage, but restrictions on black lives continue to abound through Jim Crow laws and racial discrimination. In other words, liberty, the freedom to enjoy his political and civil rights, continues to elude him and other black Americans.

Further Reading

Als, Hilton. "The Sojourner: The Elusive Langston Hughes." *The New Yorker*, 23 Feb. 2015, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/23/sojourner. Accessed 22 Feb. 2017.

Rampersad, Arnold, editor. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: The Poems, 1941–1950*, vol. 2, U of Missouri P, 2001.

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"A Reading Guide to Langston Hughes." *Poets.org*, Academy of American Poets, 1 Jan. 2000, poetsorg/text/reading-guide-langston-hughes. Accessed 22 Feb. 2017.

Harper, Donna Akiba Sullivan. *Not So Simple: The 'Simple' Stories by Langston Hughes*. U of Missouri P, 1995.

Rampersad, Arnold. "Future Scholarly Projects on Langston Hughes." *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1987, pp. 305–16.

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