

# Theme for english b by langston hughes



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

4/10/04

## Composition 2

Langston Hughes was an African American poet and author who joined other black artists to break literary barriers during the civil rights movement. The poem entitled Theme for English B was written thirty years or so after the birth of the Harlem Renaissance, but still embodies why the Renaissance had originated in the first place. I believe this poem reflected on Hughes life in general, but more importantly on the fight against the ignorance that created discrimination.

James Mercer Langston Hughes was born February 1st, 1902 in the town of Joplin Missouri. Being the great-great-grandson of the first African American to be put into public office, one could say that Hughes was destined to make his own mark in society. The first signs of talent began in the eighth grade, where he was elected class poet. After attempting to receive a degree in engineering at Columbia University, Langston went back to his love of writing. The art of writing was Langstons calling, but his father didnt believe he could make a living simply because he was black. Ironically, the Harlem Renaissance was just emerging.

The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural movement that strived to put African American poets, authors, and song writers on the same level as the white population. It was an underground uprising which included magazines filled with African American literature such as poems and short stories. Amongst these artists were Claude McKay, Bessie Smith, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes. The one characteristic that describes the Harlem

Renaissance most correctly was the fact that there was no one set style. Every artist had their own way of getting their point across. The only tie that bonded them was the push for artistic equality. 2

The Harlem Renaissance was the birth place to many African American writers, musicians, and painters, but the years falling after 1930 ultimately showed the decline of the movement. The Great Depression had come knocking, which lead to the associations supporting the cause to turn their heads to social and economic issues. Even though the movement had ended, the amount of writings in print was amazing. Between the 1920s and the early 30s more than fifty works of poetry and fiction were published. This was a huge accomplishment for African American artists as well as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. 3

Hughes was a key player during the Harlem Renaissance. In 1921 he wrote a poem called Negro Speaks of Rivers which was published in Crisis magazine<sup>4</sup> before jumping on ship to West Africa and Europe as a steward on a cargo boat. 5 This was Hughes first published work. After his travels, Langston became a busboy where he was founded. He had left a collection of poems with poet Vachel Lindsay who immediately saw the literary skill and helped publish Hughes work. 6

With the help of a scholarship, Hughes attended Lincoln University to pursue his writing career. While in school, he published his first volume of poetry as well as writing the poem The Weary Blues, which was a look at ghetto life<sup>7</sup>. Hughes poems differed from other poets because he associated his words with music. He combined blues and jazz rhythms and worked them into his poetry. Something unheard of before Hughes set the standard. This new type of writing brought culture and ethnicity into the mainstream. 8

Theme for English B was a poem Langston Hughes wrote that might have been a look at his life ten years prior. Hughes puts us in the mind of a young African American trying to receive an education. I'm not positive when this poem was written because in our text book it said 1954, but from sites and a poetry book, I've read it was created in 1951. That being said segregation was still on its way out from schools, but discrimination still existed and still does. I believe the main purpose of this poem was to inform and enlighten. After all, it has been said that discrimination is a form of ignorance. Hughes challenged ignorance by evoking the teacher to take a look at his life. Theme for English B is separated into five stanzas. Each stanza contributes to the main themes of the poem, which I believe are that the color of the skin does not ultimately determine the character someone eventually becomes. We're influenced by our surroundings, which include what we hear, see, and learn. Also, just because people are different races, it doesn't mean that they can't have the same interests.

The few lines that make up the first stanza introduce the plot of the poem to the reader. We know that there is an assignment to be completed, and from what lines four and five suggest, this assignment must be one that comes straight from inside. We see the first conflict of interest when the student sets the tone for the poem by implying that it wouldn't be so easy.

The second stanza sets down the path in which this young African American must walk in order to gain an education. The way he must walk home everyday from the college on the hill of Harlem which if you know geography is Columbia University. The same school Hughes first attempted to attend. When segregation was deemed illegal, colleges did not suddenly become populated with thousands of African Americans. It was still difficult to find

employment let alone afford a college education if you were black. Our writer explains his life, being the only black student in the class. His life was one the teacher and classmates couldnt relate to.

In the third stanza the connection between a person and their home is brought to attention. Before he gets into that, Hughes once again makes a comment that seems to disagree with the topic of the paper. Its not easy to know what is true for you and me The student explains that its not easy to figure out who you are. He uses some figurative language and says he feels and hears Harlem. What I took from this stanza was that the person we become is influenced by who and what is around us. Everyone shares this humanistic relationship with the place they call home. No matter if its in Harlem or the suburbs.

In the fourth stanza the student writes what any other person would in order try to describe who they are. This description contains concrete facts about someone that anyone could appreciate. He talks about his love for drinking, sleeping, reading, and understanding life. No longer writing like an average student, he goes straight for the throat by pointing out that just because hes black, it doesnt mean he may not enjoy what other races do. Hughes tries his best to act the role of a student by playing with sentences like this one. By making sentences such as I guess me being colored doesnt make me not like Hughes implies that even though this student may not be the best writer, he still knows what is important to him.

In the fifth and final stanza, the student brings a harsh reality to the surface. This being that sometimes a white person doesnt want anything to do with a

black person and vice versa, but its impossible because our population consists of every nationality out there. Putting a positive note on it, Hughes conveys that it is possible to learn from each other. Even though the student may be younger and colored, the teacher could still learn from the culture and upbringing in which the writer has lived through. He also includes that he himself can learn from the teacher.

Kristina Zarlengo, who also attended Columbia University, offers her own perspective on this work of literature. According to Kristina, she believes that this poem was written in free verse. This poem contains rhythm that does not stay the same, as well as without forced language and phrases, in which avid poetry readers have learned to scold over time. An example she gave was that in the first stanza Hughes seems to establish a rhythm with Salem and Harlem, but then he introduces a new rhythm with class and Nicholas. He continues to do this throughout the course of the poem. 9

Repetition is another element Zarlengo sought out in Theme for English B by Langston Hughes. She stated that Hughes used repetition especially in the stanza about ones relationship with their home. Zarlengo goes on to explain that it is related to Hughes love for music. How he appreciated the music that didnt have a limited beat and/or language pattern. By taking the free flowing beats of jazz and the unlimited language pattern in bebop, Hughes combined both styles in order to establish the form and structure of this poem. 10

After many paragraphs about the music during Hughes era, Zarlengo finally gets back to Theme for English B. She moves on to the element of theme

and how she believes that this poem sums up the American dream. Trying to prove her point, she gives evidence straight from the second stanza in which the student tells of his birth in Winston, Salem. By using the move from the south to the north, Kristina suggests that it was a change that was caused by oppression. 11

I agree with most of what Kristina talked about in her analysis of Theme for English B. This poem was not restrained by any structure. Hughes used free verse just as a student would to write a biography about himself. I did notice the inconsistent rhythm of the rhyme as well. It wasn't a rhythm I was familiar with, but I'd like to see how someone would read it. By reading her thoughts of the theme, it does make sense now that I think of it. But just because what she thinks is the theme makes a whole lot of sense, it doesn't mean that mine is wrong. People interpret poetry differently. I myself went with the whole equality route. All in all, my thoughts weren't that far off.

The poem Theme for English B by Langston Hughes is best summarized by the author's life in general. It's not hard to see the similarities between the student in this poem and the man who wrote it. Langston had no advantage in the fact that his grandfather was the first African American in office. Hughes had to make a name for himself on his own. He did this by traveling on a cargo boat, working as a busboy, and eventually contributing his works to the Harlem Renaissance, which gave African American literature the credit it deserved. The student who wrote this assignment grew up to be a world class author and poet.

1 [Http://www. redhotjazz. com](http://www.redhotjazz.com)

2 The Harlem Renaissance Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia

3 The Harlem Renaissance Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia

4 Langston Hughes Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia

5 [Http://www. redhotjazz. com](http://www.redhotjazz.com)

6 Langston Hughes Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia

7 Langston Hughes Quick Facts Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia

8 The Harlem Renaissance Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia

9 Poetry for Students Ruby, Mary K., ed. Pg. 201

10 Poetry for Students Ruby, Mary K., ed. Pg 201

11 Poetry for Students Ruby, Mary K., ed. Pg. 203