

# Racism in poetry literature review

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



James Langston Hughes' "I, Too, Sing America" and David Hernandez's "Pigeons" are both poems which explore racism. The two poems are very different from one another in pace, tone and in use of imagery. However, there are also a few similarities between them. Overall, Hernandez' poem leaves a stronger image in the reader's mind, and therefore it is arguable that it does its job in conveying its theme more effectively.

Hughes wrote "I, Too, Sing America," in 1932. At this point in history, African-American individuals were not accepted in American society. They were discriminated against, segregated from white people, and were frequently assaulted or murdered. Hughes wrote "I, Too, Sing America," in response to this time and situation.

David Hernandez's poem "Pigeons," was written in 1991. It compares the treatment and actions of pigeons to those of modern day Hispanics.

Both poets use their opening lines as immediate introductions to their racism-related themes. The first line of "I, Too, Sing America" repeats its title. This is an effective way of clearly signposting to readers the theme of the poem, that although the speaker has black skin, he is like the white Americans in that he sings the American National Anthem. Moreover, the speaker of the poem is a slave, and he is arguing that he is just as American as the white people of the country.

Hernandez opens his poem with a hard-hitting statement: "Pigeons are the spiks of Birdland" (Hernandez, line 1). As in "I, Too, Sing America," this provides a sound introduction to the remainder of the poem. Hernandez was Hispanic, which seems to make the use of the word 'spiks' even more surprising and, therefore, effective.

In “ Pigeons,” Hernandez uses comparison and much imagery in depicting the theme of racism. It could be considered a lyrical poem.

**Hernandez reveals, through his poem, his opinion that Hispanics are always treated as outsiders in American society.**

Hernandez illustrates how pigeons are treated in a way that is second-rate, for example, “ so they are not accepted anywhere. Nobody wants to give pigeons a job” (line 15) and “ most everybody passing up a pigeon pack / tries to break it up because they move funny” (line 5/6).

He also mentions the treatment of other, more popular, pet birds:

“ Parakeets, canaries and parrots

have the market sown up as far as that goes.

They live in fancy cages, get 3 meals a day

for a song and dance routine” (lines 16-19).

He then compares the handling of such birds to that of pigeons:

“ When was the last time you saw a pigeon

in someone’s home?

Unless they bleached their feathers white

and try to pass off as doves,

you will never see pet pigeons.

Besides, their accents give them away

when they start cooing” (lines 20-26).

This is a particularly poignant part of the poem as it emphasizes Hernandez’s understanding that Hispanics are treated less respectfully than are white Americans. In mentioning the colour of the pigeons’ feathers and their ‘cooing’ accents, the poet is linking the image to the colour of Hispanics’ skin and to their differing accents.

The poet has used powerful imagery as a technique all through his poem. Evidently, the pigeon is the central image. Throughout the poem, and once it is over, the reader is left with a clear image of pigeons in the many circumstances that Hernandez has focussed on. An especially enduring image come from his comparison of pigeons to youths on the streets:

“...they move funny

and seem to be dancing like young street thugs

with an 18-foot, 10-speaker Sanyo book box radio

on a 2-foot red shoulder strap” (lines 6-9).

His use colour when describing pigeons is also very powerful, for example “Pigeons have feathers of a different colour. / They are too bright to be dull / and too dull to be bright” (lines 10-12), and “ Unless they bleached their feathers white / and try to pass off as doves” (lines 22/23). This use of colour further endorses the theme of racism.

Hughes' poem is very different. He does not rely on imagery or on comparison of any kind. Instead, it is more a narrative poem as it tells a brief story about a slave in his master's house. The theme is conveyed through the actions and the thoughts of the speaker. The whole narrative is a metaphor for the bigger picture of racism in America at the time.

The speaker is the servant, and he talks of the disrespect he gets from his master. For example, when visitors arrive at the house, the speaker is sent to the kitchen to eat alone. (lines 4/5). Still, the speaker then illustrates that he doesn't take offence in the line: " but I laugh" (line 6).

To instil the point even more, the speaker says that, while eating in the kitchen, he eats well (line 7), suggesting that he is relaxed and accepting of the situation. He also tells the reader that he " grow[s] strong" (line 8). This demonstrates how the servant's esteem, spirit, and sense of ' truth' remains steadfast.

The narrative about being sent to the kitchen is a metaphor for the larger picture of how African-Americans were separated from white Americans and were treated as second-class citizens, in society.

Later in the poem, the speaker talks of an optimistic future, where all people are treated equally: " Tomorrow, / I'll be at the table / when company comes" (lines 10-12). The servant is showing bravery and hopefulness about an improved future.

The last line of the poem simply states " I, too, am American." This line is effective in summarising the theme of the poem: that black Americans are as American as their white counter-parts, and ought to have equal freedom and rights.

In the final line of “ Pigeons,” Hernandez repeats the opening line: “ Pigeons are the spiks of birdland” (line 37).

As with the opening lines, both poets use their last lines as a way of reinstating the central theme and message.

“ Pigeons,” on initial reading, looks like it may be written in loose blank verse. Many of the lines throughout the poem have around ten syllables. On the other hand, on closer inspection, there are frequent short lines intermixed, such as ‘ I tell you,’ which is made up of only three syllables. Therefore “ Pigeons” appears to be a freeverse poem. There is also no obvious rhyming scheme.

“ I, Too, Sing America,” is also written in freeverse. Hughes has made effective use of line breaks in his poem to create silence and thinking space for the reader. This is particularly evident in the second half of the poem when the speaker is thinking about the future: “ Nobody’ll dare / Say to me / ‘ Eat in the kitchen / Then” (lines 13-16).

Both “ Pigeons” and “ I, Too, Sing America,” are strong, memorable poems tackling the theme of racism. They were both written in different times and are, indeed, about different races. Therefore there are clear differences in the styles of the poems. Furthermore, Hughes’ poem is far more optimistic about the future, whereas Hernandez’s remains fairly bitter right up until the end.

As the two are so different, it is hard to argue which is the most effective in terms of portraying its subject matter. However, leaving a lasting image is an integral part of a successful poem. While “ I, Too, Sing America” features a

strong image of the servant in his master's house, "Pigeons" is multi-layered and uses a common situation, in other words the pigeons, to help the reader understand the nature of racism. Therefore, "Pigeons" is arguably more effective.

## **Works Cited**

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