

# Example of james langston hughes research paper

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Much of James Langston Hughes' work addresses the racial inequality in the United States of America at the beginning of the twentieth century. There are few writers whose poetry relates this particular subject in such an eloquent and powerful fashion. The work is accessible to most readers, even those who have not experienced racism first-hand. In his three poems, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "I, Too, Sing America," and "Harlem," James Langston Hughes explores the struggles through which African-Americans had to endure in the first half of the twentieth century to be considered equal to white American citizens. Through his poetry, Langston Hughes shows the reader how life was for him, and other African-Americans, during that time. It is perhaps the accessibility and relevance of his work which makes it so unique, and a worthwhile part of world literature.

James Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902, and died on 22, May, 1967. He was a central figure of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance (Biography). Hughes lived as an African-American, and experienced the racism that existed in America in the early twentieth century. The racial-inequality was on a large scale, and existed throughout the country. Langston Hughes, along with other African-Americans, was treated as a second-class citizen. However, despite his suffering, he retained love and compassion for all races (Biography). His acceptance of all races is particularly evident in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," which he wrote when he was just eighteen years old (Biography). This freeverse poem is relatively short, being only thirteen lines long excluding breaks between stanzas.

The poem opens with, "I've known rivers: / I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the / flow of human blood in human veins" (lines 1-3).

The river provides a symbol for the connection between all humans from evolution or creation of mankind, and right up until the present day. Hughes continues the poem by listing rivers that represent the cultural history of Western society.

These rivers include the Euphrates (line 7), the Nile (line 9) and the Mississippi (line 10). The poet appears to have chosen these three examples as they represent the history of the human race from Biblical times to the stage of the American Civil War. The Euphrates is believed by many to be at the root of Western civilization. The speaker of the poem declares to have " bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young" (line 7). Therefore, the context of the poem begins at the dawn of civilization.

Hughes then goes on to concentrate on the African experience, saying, " I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep / I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it" (lines 8/9). Neither of the two assertions are limited to a black voice, as white and Asian races have both lived around the Congo and were also amid the Egyptians' slaves who constructed the pyramids. This is particularly interesting as an example of the poet's awareness and acceptance of many races and cultures.

Hughes emphasizes the American experience in the line: " I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln / went down to New Orleans . . . ." (lines 10/11). To many people, Abraham Lincoln represents the emancipation of slaves in 1862 (American), and the Mississippi River is a symbol of the blood of all races.

In the final line of the poem, Hughes repeats " My soul has grown deep like the rivers" (line 17). In doing this, he is emphasizing the central theme of the

poem. Hughes is implying that an individual who recognises his soul, in turn, recognises his own identity. The river in the poem provides a metaphor for the linkage of mankind, across all races. The water represents blood, and the notion that we are all linked by common blood. This poem is a fine example of a work displaying Hughes' acceptance of all races. While many white Americans, at the time, appeared to consider African Americans to be of a different species to themselves, Hughes' words show that he believed in equality and unity between all human beings.

Hughes wrote the poem "I, Too, Sing America," in 1932. At this time, African-Americans were not accepted in society. Black people were discriminated against, separated from using the same places as white people, and were frequently murdered. Hughes wrote "I, Too, Sing America," as a response to the situation. The piece narrates how black servants were made to eat in the kitchen, a situation that represents the segregation that occurred on a larger scale.

The opening line of the poem repeats the title. By doing so, the poet has immediately introduced his theme, that although he has black skin, he still sings the American National Anthem, just like the white Americans.

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.

The poem tells of the disrespect the servant receives from his master: when visitors arrive, the servant is sent to eat alone, in the kitchen (lines 4/5).

However, the speaker then goes on to say "but I laugh" (line 6), illustrating that he doesn't take offence or allow his self-esteem to be knocked. This is an unusual way of telling the tale, as many poets focus on the negative

aspects of the situation and on the feelings of oppression. Hughes' poem is different in that the servant displays strength of character and optimism. Furthermore, while dining in the kitchen, the servant eats well (line 7), signifying that he is comfortable in the situation. This is another way in which the voice of the poem is unique. He also claims to "grow strong" (line 8), which shows how the servant's spirit, and his sense of what is 'right' remains strong. Many people today think of black servants as being quiet and submissive. Hughes' poem shows that this wasn't always the case. The concept of being sent to the kitchen to eat is really a metaphor for the larger picture of how African-Americans were discriminated against, and separated from white Americans, in society. The discrimination existed on a vast scale. Black people were not allowed to use the same transport as white people. They were frequently treated as second class citizens. Further on in the poem, the servant speaks of a positive future, where blacks and whites are treated equally: "Tomorrow, / I'll be at the table / when company comes" (lines 10-12). Here, the slave is displaying bravery and resilience in maintaining hope about a better future. Additionally, the servant says: "Besides, / They'll see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed" (lines 18-20). 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. By stating that he sings the American national anthem, the servant is further demonstrating the theme. The strength of the voice makes this poem memorable and unique. Many readers of poetry contend that a memorable

poem holds a great deal of value. If this is true, “ I, too, sing America” is a valuable and worthwhile poem.

“ Harlem,” is rather different to both “ A Negro Speaks of Rivers,” and “ I, Too, Sing America.” Unlike these two examples, which are both freeverse and with no obvious rhyme scheme, “ Harlem” is loosely metrical and contains literary techniques such as regular rhyme, imagery and rhetorical questions. Nonetheless, this poem is similar to Hughes’ other works in that it positively contributes to knowledge and awareness of the plight of African Americans in the twentieth century, though this was written in the middle of the century rather than at the beginning.

Hughes wrote “ Harlem” in 1951, a time when American blacks were frustrated with their unequal status to whites. By this point, laws has been passed allowing blacks to vote and to own property. However, prejudice still continued. Black children had to attend segregated, substandard schools and adults could only aspire to secure the lower paid jobs such as ditch-digging and shoe shining. By the middle of the century, the feeling among the black community was one of irritation (Black). Interestingly, the tone of “ Harlem” lacks irritation. Instead, it carries a gentle and pensive tone.

The first line of the poem poses the question, “ What happens to a dream deferred?” (line 1). In this context, the “ dream” means a life goal. The poem explores, through a series of further questions, what the negative effects are when a goal has to be delayed. Around the mid twentieth century, many African Americans felt that they were having to delay their goals and dreams in life, as a result of on-going white oppression. This poem is representative of the feeling about many elements of such oppression.

The first of the following questions is: “ Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?” (lines 3/4). The raisin is a simile for the dream. A raisin is already dry, and if it is left out in the sun it becomes completely hard and impossible to eat. Therefore, the poet is saying that a dream made to wait becomes as dry and useless as the aforementioned raisin. Dreams such as owning a home were frequently out of reach for African Americans, causing some to lose hope that equality would ever be granted.

Hughes then goes on to say that if the dream does not dry up and ruin, perhaps it will “ fester like a sore - / And then run” (lines 5/6). The sore refers to a skin wound, which is again a simile for the dream. It is best for a sore to dry up and therefore heal. If it begins to fester and run, this is an indication that the sore is infected. The simile extends to mean that a dream left to fester may become infected with restlessness that may in turn lead to crime. Law-breaking behaviour is a potential consequence of oppression and of poverty. A person who is denied his freedom and his pride could easily become so downtrodden that he turns to crime as an alternative.

The content of the second stanza shifts from questions to a suggestion: “ Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load” (lines 11/12). Here the simile is that the dream is like a heavy load, making the owner walk slowly and act clumsily. A dream forced to defer may sag and become too heavy for the person’s mind to carry. This sagging could lead to depression. Hughes is exploring the different outcomes that could result from oppression; unhappiness, depression, and other mental illnesses are just three examples.

The final line is alone in its stanza. Here, the poet returns to using a

rhetorical question, but instead of being a simile like the previous concepts, the speaker exercises a metaphor of an explosion: “ Or does it explode?” (line 14). Bombs are a good example of something that explode and cause huge devastation. Although all of the listed possible results of a deferred dream are negative, this final one is the worst. If the person whose dream is deferred loses all hope of realising his goals, he might “ explode” with his depression. The consequences of this could be disastrous. An explosion could be in the form of a serious crime, a serious breakdown, or worse. Therefore, an explosion could be seen as any of the already mentioned examples, but amplified beyond belief.

Through these three poems, James Langston Hughes demonstrates different stages of the black civil rights movement in America, and the ways in which African-Americans were made to suffer through inequality and prejudice. “ The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and “ I, Too, Sing American,” both have an optimistic tone, despite their grave subject matters. “ Harlem,” on the other hand, has a rather negative feel, without the same hope for the future of the previous poems. These works are just three examples of many which Hughes wrote during his life. They are all memorable and unique in their own ways. In terms of beautiful poetry, and in terms of shedding light on the racial inequality of the twentieth century, the works of James Langston Hughes is a worthwhile element of world literature. Perhaps one of the most commendable qualities of Hughes’ poetry is its accessibility. Most of his poems can be read and understood by the majority of readers, which is a major advantage to a poet wanting to gain popularity among the general



public. Hughes' work has been popular for many years now, and will probably continue to be so for a long time to come.

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