

A look at point-of-view and reader placement in "i, too" and "douglass"



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During the Civil Rights Movement, Langston Hughes and Robert Hayden each wrote poems addressing the future of the movement. Two of these poems, which expressed their hope for the future and for the equality of black Americans, were “ I, too” by Hughes, and “ Douglass” by Hayden. While both poems address the brighter, better future, they arrive there in different ways. Both poets use very specific tones and voices for their poems, creating two very different experiences for the readers to arrive in the same liberated future. Hughes’ first-person directed poem creates a much more immediate sense of the future, and creating a personal emotional reaction to oppression. The degree of removal in Hayden’s poem, however, allows the poem to be more abstract and passionate, read as an emotional response rather than inspiring emotional responses. Hughes’ poem “ I, too” is written in the first person, inviting the reader into the position of the “ I”, to experience the emotional journey of the narrator. “ I”, who is revealed as the “ darker brother” (ln. 2), desires a better place in the future. This is not a distant future, but one that he imagines grasping “ tomorrow” (ln. 8). The immediacy is shown through the seemingly small-scale victories in which the narrator defines this better future. The narrator uses the dinner table as his indicator for having achieved the equality he desires. The smallness of the event also allows for more personalized emotions to seep into the voice of the poem. The narrator is frustrated and angry, as he “ dare[s]” (ln. 11) anyone to send him away from the table tomorrow, and imagines how “ ashamed” (ln. 17) those who have been sending him away will feel for having done so. They will feel ashamed, for having denied the “ beautiful” (ln. 16) and “ strong” (ln. 7) narrator, Hughes’ black America the right to join them. The narrator’s strength comes from having survived oppression, and it

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is with this strength that he will be uplifted into equality, using fear and defiance to overcome his oppressors. The poem hopefully continues that hopefully, one day, the narrator will not be seen as an equal through fear and force, but will be accepted as an equal through the sincere regret of others for having oppressed him. In the end, the narrator, and black America, comes full circle, but grows during the journey. When he begins, he “sing [s] America” (ln. 1). He yearns for America, and he has the voice of America, a man of the poor, huddled masses. At the end of the poem, his future has not been realized, but he imagines it, he can see it, can almost grasp it. And with this future in reach, this equality and liberty and freedom, he no longer simply yearns for America. He comes to the realization that his struggle, and his power to overcome, means that he “[is] America” (ln. 18). Hayden does not use a first person narrator in his poem “Douglass”, but writes his poem like a Romantic outburst of feelings. Since the reader is not given an identity, an “I”, he must imagine being a maybe of an audience whom Hayden is addressing. When Hayden writes “ours” into the first line, he sets up the oratory tone, and immediately creates a distinction between himself and the reader; a distinction which is absent in “I, too”. The “ours” is telling us that this poem is not specifically about us. It is not any single point of view, but it is about a people, a race, claiming liberty for themselves. Unlike Hughes’ poem, “Douglass” is not driven by the actions of the narrator, but it is driven by the passion and emotion of the speaker. “Douglass” is not emotional on the personal level that Hughes’ poem is, but, rather, is emotional in a removed manner. Emotion is conveyed through Hayden’s impassioned definition of equality and liberty. Hayden begins his poem with a definition of what Liberty really is; it is “this beautiful / and terrible thing, needful to man

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as air, / usable as earth" (ln. 1-2); it is only real when it is "truly instinct" (ln. 4), as passively present as blood flow, thoughts, and reflexes, unlike Hughes' liberty, which the narrator imagines can be achieved by force. When liberty becomes second nature, says Hayden, then it is time to thank Frederick Douglass, the abused, oppressed man who envisioned this future when it seemed impossible. The passionate voice of Hayden's poem is desperate, lost in its need for freedom and liberty. Since the voice is not the singularized voice of Hughes' "I, too", we are left struggling with it, fitting it into our own lives in a removed manner, yet feeling just as anxious for liberty. The poem seems to fall over itself with desperation and respect. The prose-like style is complicated by long sentences and abrupt line breaks. Ideas break into each other, as though out of breath and racing to get somewhere where breathing is possible. The chaos of the struggle to understand liberty and understand where the idea of liberated black Americans comes from is communicated through an abundance of commas, semicolons, and colons. The reader tumbles along with them, looking for the real end, given only consolatory pauses, but never the true ending we want. The real stopping point occurs at the end of the first sentence of the two-sentence poem. After racing to tell us about freedom and liberty, to tell us about Douglass, and to tell us about what will happen when freedom is here, we are finally given a period. It is in this period that we are meant to imagine that the chaotic journey toward the future is completed. A single sentence follows: "Oh, not with statues' rhetoric, / not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone, / but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives / fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing" (ln. 11-14). This last piece of the poem, this hindsight from a future where liberty has been achieved, is <https://assignbuster.com/a-look-at-point-of-view-and-reader-placement-in-i-too-and-douglass/>

calm, and reflecting on how to be thankful to Douglass for having given us the idea to dare to dream what seemed an impossible future. The tranquility of this sentence compared to the previous one embodies the idea of what the nature of our thankfulness should be: that the most appropriate thankfulness is simply living in a liberated lives. How a reader's identity is fit into a poem changes how the poem will affect the reader. When reading and enacting Hughes' poem in first person, the reader is involved in the actions of the poem, concerned about the seemingly small factors in the allegorical narrator's life. We experience easy emotional shifts, feeling anger and frustration at simple commands, and satisfyingly defiant in "dar[ing]" (ln. 11) our oppressors to attempt to command us again. In Hayden's poem, the reader is much less involved in the action of the poem, so the emotion is guided by the intensity of diction, structure, and flow. However, despite the difference of the methods of affecting the emotions of the readers, both poems achieve a similar goal: both poems show the reader a potential future of equality and liberty, and both poems make the reader yearn for it. This better future is possible. ' Here it is,' say both poems, ' it is beautiful. This is what you want.'