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“I, Too” by Langston Hughes and The Fight For The Black American Identity

Langston Hughes was an African American poet, activist, columnist, and novelist.

Widely regarded as one of the primary leaders of the artistic movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes’ works have become classics of American literature and a source of inspiration for fighters for social and racial justice. His 1925 poem, “I, Too”, is written in response to a work by another legendary American poet, Walt Whitman. Whitman’s poem “I Hear America Singing” embodies a feeling of pride for the American people, their efforts to make their way in the world and the freedom they have to be and become what they wish. For Hughes, like many Black Americans of his time, these words rang hollow. After centuries of exclusion from the definition of American, “I, Too” stands as a recognition of Black America’s claim to national pride and hope for future equality. In “I, Too”, Hughes reflects with unrelenting optimism on what it means to be African American.

Succinctly, Hughes opens his poem with his four-word, one-line opening stanza: “I, too, sing America.” (1) This statement and the poem that follows are all narrated from the first person. While it may be tempting to substitute the poet himself into this spot, Hughes’ use of “I” is written in the “collective first person singular”. According to Morgan State University professor Karl Henzy, this unique pronoun “is a trans-individual entity that has spanned many centuries and lives, but that does not speak of itself as a “we” because it has a sense of unbroken,

unified identity” (Henzy). Use of the collective first person singular is common especially throughout Hughes’ first book of poems, “The Weary Blues”, the collection in which “I, Too” was published. This deliberate unification of the Black experience into a common identity is consistent with his ties to the Pan-Africanism movement. But there is more still that this powerful opening has to offer. historian David Ward noted that the phrase “I, too” has multiple hidden meanings in and of itself: "There is a multi-dimensional pun in the title, “I, too” ... If you hear the word as the number two, it suddenly shifts the terrain to someone who is secondary, subordinate, even, inferior ... The other reference if you hear that “too” as “two” is not subservience, but dividedness" (Ward). The themes of inclusion (‘too’ meaning also), subordination, and segregation are all critical to this poem’s message and are all suggested within the title and very first line.

Additionally, this opening serves the purpose of tying itself into conversation with Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing”. Whitman's poem contains a line which depicts “Each [American] singing what belongs to him or her and to none else” (Whitman). In Whitman’s 1860 vision of America, participation in the American song was in part an act of ownership in oneself and one’s nation. Therefore, the simple phrase “I, too, sing America” (1) not only acknowledges the pervasive segregation and exclusion through Jim Crow law, but also the inherent right of African Americans to ownership of themselves and their part in their nation.

In the second stanza, the “I” explicitly defines itself as “the darker brother”, sent to the kitchen and hidden away from society. In quick succession, Hughes describes line by line the collective response to such discrimination: “But I laugh, / And eat well, / And grow strong.” (5-7) This poem is drenched in optimism. It is no surprise then that the idealized described

response to acts of subjugation and oppression is laughter and perseverance. The image of a black domestic servant being sent out of sight and into the kitchen parallels the suppression and oppression of black society itself in the early 20th century. The force with which African Americans are denied their seat at the table may be discerned by the alliterative succession of harsh ‘/k/’ sound in the phrase “when company comes” (4). This stanza taken together is reminiscent of a statement made by W.E.B. DuBois on the Black experience: “One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro ... two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”. As the “darker brother” to White America, African Americans must constantly fight to establish themselves and their identity in an openly hostile environment.

The third and fourth stanzas are written in the language of hope and the future. Opening with a stark single-worded line “Tomorrow” (8) and ending with a similarly solitary “Then.” (14), the third stanza’s poetic structure emphasizes two points. Firstly, that the vision depicted be bookended with reminders of the future to remind the reader that what is written is not currently reality; secondly, that the foundations of the envisioned ideal are bare and small and fragile. However, the future painted by Hughes in these stanzas was optimistic and bold. The phrases “When company comes” and “Eat in the kitchen” (3-4, 10-13) are repeated here, but they are subverted. The most obvious subversion is simply their order of appearance. A more subtle change is that the “I” takes on an active form. Rather than being sent to the kitchen from the table, the poet now claims that “I’ll be at the table” (9), an assumption of Black America’s rightful spot in the nation. The command itself, to “Eat in the kitchen”, is dismissed as a phrase that nobody would dare say and neutralized by the addition of quotation marks. Further, in the

fourth stanza, there is another implied statement through the continued subversion. By asserting that in this reversed reality, “They’ll ... be ashamed” (16-17), Hughes comments on his current reality and the shame that Black Americans were made to feel about their own existence.

By the last line, Hughes has completed the reclamation of the American identity for the collective Black conscious. The poem states that “I, too, am America” (18). Resuming the use of the present tense, the poem clarifies that there is no distance between its present reality and the fact that African Americans are -- not will be -- America. Within eighteen short lines of poetry, Langston Hughes made a clear and persuasive argument for a collective Black identity, established a vision of a moral subversion of oppression, and staked claim on a seat at the table of America for African Americans. For generations now, “I, Too” has helped Americans of many diverse backgrounds realize their claim to Americanness is valid and just. To those in this country who feel unwelcome and unwanted, let this poem’s words provide the solace that no matter what anyone says, you, too, are America.

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