The Big Sea: An Autobiography Study Guide

The Big Sea: An Autobiography by Langston Hughes

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Plot Summary

Langston Hughes is a young black boy growing up around the turn of the twentieth century. He reflects on the world around him, noting the circumstances in life related to one's skin color. As Langston grows to be a young man, he finds that he has a gift and a passion for writing poetry.

Langston grows up moving around a lot, because his mother is poor, and she is always looking for a better job. Sometimes Langston lives with his grandmother or with family friends. In school, Langston loves reading all kinds of books, and writes very good poetry. When he is seventeen, his father sends for him to come live on his father's estate for a while in Mexico. Langston's father only cares about money, and does not have time to spend getting to know his son. Langston starts college, but drops out to become a seaman, sailing to Africa for his first trip. It is hard to find jobs on ships, since many crewmen will not work with a black man. He spends some time stranded in Europe, living as a pauper with artists, and enjoys the jazz of Paris. Jazz, blues, and the Charleston have taken over Paris and Harlem, and Langston loves being around to hear the music and the laughter. It is a happy, carefree time, and everyone seems to be enlightened and letting go of racism.

Langston returns home and gets a scholarship to Lincoln College. He has already had two books of poetry published, although they have not made him any money yet. Langston makes many friends, and they love to play pranks on each other. Langston stirs up some controversy by suggesting that there should be black faculty members for his all-black college. During his senior year, Langston works on his first novel, "Not Without Laughter." He gets help and money from an old white lady who wants to encourage the publication of black literature, and the two become close friends. When Langston realizes that his patron only wants him to write things that sound primitive, to reflect what she thinks of black people, he decides not to let her pay his way anymore. The lady is very angry, and turns him out of her house. The fun roaring twenties have ended, and with the Great Depression beginning, Langston realizes that he will once again need to work for a living. He decides to make writing his life's work.

Part I, Twenty-One, Beyond Sandy Hook—Father

Part I, Twenty-One, Beyond Sandy Hook—Father Summary and Analysis

When Langston is growing up, moving from place to place, he and his family have to struggle to make ends meet. Through his various odd jobs, Langston does not imagine that someday he will be a famous writer.

The book opens with Langston throwing all of his books overboard a ship. At the age of twenty-one, Langston has just embarked on his first sea voyage, a trip to Africa. Langston sees this as both his first chance to be a man, and leave his childhood behind, and also a chance to connect with Africa, the homeland of his people. Having left school, Langston wants to symbolically let go of everything he has worked for so far, and start anew, so he throws all of his schoolbooks into the sea. This is the first reference to the title of the book. Langston and several others are the mess boys for the ship, which means they help prepare and serve meals, and clean the officers' rooms. Langston does not mind his work, and he likes his roommates well enough. They spend most of their shore leave getting as drunk as they can afford. When the ship finally gets to the coast of Africa, Langston is disappointed to find that no one thinks he is black anymore. Langston's parents are of mixed heritage, with French, English, African, and Native American blood, and as a result, Langston is a light brown, which in Africa is considered to be quite different from "negro."

Langston recalls his growing up years, with his situation always changing based on where better jobs are available. Born in 1902, he often lives with his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas. His grandmother is so proud that she refuses to do manual labor for others, so they often have trouble paying the mortgage. Most of the "colored" families in the area have to take in laundry, or cook for white families, in order to pay their mortgages. Langston and his grandmother sometimes have to eat things like wild dandelions because they cannot afford food. When Langston lives with her, he does not have any playmates, so he amuses himself with books. Soon, books become more real to Langston than other people. When the time comes for Langston to go to school, there is only a "white" school nearby, so the city wants Langston to travel across town to a school for black children. Langston's mother goes directly to the school board, and argues his case, and so Langston is the only non-white child allowed to come to the "white" school. A few of the teachers and students persecute him for his skin color, but some of them defend him. From this, young Langston learns the lesson that although there are white people who are worth hating, most races are made up of mostly good people.

Sometimes Langston lives with his mother in her rented room. She is usually not able to obtain a real apartment, but just a room in some business building. She does not even

have a bathroom, and heats her room with a tiny stove, just big enough for one pot. Langston goes out into the alleys to find wooden trash that they can burn. Despite being very poor, Langston's mother likes to take him to see plays, which he loves. Langston's father decides that he is tired of the way a black man cannot hold a high professional position in the U.S.A., and so he goes down to Mexico to make his fortune. One day, he sends for the family, so Langston, his mother, and grandmother go down to Mexico. There is a terrible earthquake as soon as they get there, with buildings sinking into the ground and tarantulas coming out of the walls. The family turns around and goes back to the United States, and Langston does not see his father again until he is seventeen. When Langston's grandmother dies, he goes to live with some friends named Auntie Reed and Uncle Reed. They take good care of him and he grows to love them very much. Although Uncle Reed never goes to church, Auntie Reed makes Langston go every week. One night, Langston attends a revival, and there is a special service focusing on the children in the congregation. After all the other children have stood up to let Jesus save them, Langston sits in his pew, wondering when he will feel Jesus asking for his soul. Since all the adults of the church are praying over him and begging Langston to be saved, he finally stands up and pretends that he feels something. The church goes wild with applause. Later that night, Auntie Reed overhears Langston crying, and she assumes that it is because Jesus is working in his heart. In reality, Langston is crying because he only faked becoming saved, and since nothing happened, he now feels that there is no salvation.

Langston's mother remarries a man named Homer Clark. They have a son named Kit, and Langston is very happy to finally have a father and brother around. Homer moves from job to job, and the family moves all the time too. Since so many black families have migrated to Cleveland from the South, it is hard and expensive for black families to find a place to live. Regardless of how many times they move, Langston's family always lives in the basement or attic of a building. By this point, Langston is in high school in Cleveland. Sometimes he lives on his own, renting a tiny room. As soon as he is old enough to work, he always has a part-time job, but he has trouble finding work, because of his race. He attends a high school that has a student body made up of mostly blacks and immigrants. Often, when the students vote for certain offices, the election will come down to Jew versus gentile, and Langston imagines that the reason he so often gets elected, whether or not he runs, is because the other students think that black is a sort of middle ground between Jew and gentile (non-Jew). When Langston's class has to elect a Class Poet, they pick Langston because they assume that a black person must have a good sense of rhythm. Having been thrust into the role, Langston finds that he loves writing poetry, especially when he encounters the then-controversial style of Carl Sandburg. Langston tries combining the free-verse of Sandburg with the vocabulary of the black folks, wanting something that will speak to him in his own language. Langston even submits poems to New York magazines, although he always gets back rejection notices.

When Langston is seventeen, his father, James Hughes, sends for Langston to come spend the summer in Mexico. Langston's mother is very angry, since Langston is finally old enough to get a real job all summer, and help support the family. Nonetheless, Langston is very excited about meeting his father and going to Mexico. Langston says

goodbye to his angry mother, and goes with his father, who does not seem happy to see him. James is always in a hurry, and always trying to save money. They ride the terrible cheap seats on the train, all the way to Mexico, and Langston sees how James has contempt for the black people who live like peasants. When they get to Mexico, James expresses identical contempt for the Mexican peasants. James is very rich, with a large estate, as well as several other properties he manages. Rather than show Langston his ranch, which Langston desperately wants to see, James tells his son to learn bookkeeping, so that he will be of some use. Langston does not take well to bookkeeping or learning Spanish, and he is miserable, bored, and lonely all summer. When James finally decides to take Langston to see his ranch, they must get up at three in the morning to stand in line at the train station for the cheap seats. When his father is hurrying him through breakfast, Langston feels that he can not put up with it any more, and says that he does not want to go see the ranch and the bullfighters. James goes and leaves him behind, and Langston lies in bed for four days, not eating. By the time James gets back, Langston is so sick that James gets proper train tickets for both of them, to take Langston to the hospital in Mexico City. Langston stays for several weeks, and when he finds out how much it is costing James, he is happy to be staying in the hospital. All James cares about is money, and since James never gives Langston anything else as a father, Langston is happy that at least he is important enough for James to spend money on.

Part I, Twenty-One, Back Home—Bullfights

Part I, Twenty-One, Back Home—Bullfights Summary and Analysis

On the train back home from Mexico, several white passengers mistake Langston for a Mexican, and speak to him in Spanish. When they cross the border into the U.S.A., the "colored" passengers have to wait in a separate waiting room, which is not as nice as the one for whites and Mexicans. Langston just orders his sleeping car in Spanish, and goes into the good waiting room. When they stop for a short while in St. Louis, Missouri, a waiter asks Langston if he is Mexican or "colored," saying that he will not serve a "colored" man. Langston answers him truthfully, and reflects to himself that it is good to be back in the good old U.S.A. Langston returns for his senior year of high school, which goes well. In addition to being the Class Poet, Langston edits the year book. Since there are so many Russian Jewish immigrants at his school, many of the students are very excited about the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, and they eagerly look forward to a new prosperous, fair era of communism. When the war (World War I) ends, the nation rejoices, but it makes things harder for the black citizens. With more white people in town, many white landlords triple their black tenants' rent. Worse, since so many white soldiers are returning to town, many black workers lose their jobs to returned soldiers. Langston's mother is working as a waitress, which James considers to be low, vulgar work, a source of shame.

After Langston graduates high school, his father sends for him again to come to Mexico. Langston does not want to go, remembering what a bad time he had last summer, but James hints that if Langston will come to Mexico again, James might pay for Langston to go to college. This is really Langston's only chance to go to college, especially since his mother wants him to get a job right away instead. She thinks that it is wrong for her to keep working as hard as she does, while he goes off and gets unnecessary education. Langston points out that he can support her much better after he has a college degree, rather than being a busboy or porter all his life. He goes to Mexico, and tries to enjoy it. James has a new German housekeeper, a kindly immigrant woman who speaks only German. Langston comments that his father would later marry this woman, a testament to James's admiration of the German people. James tells Langston to learn German, and continues trying to teach him bookkeeping skills. When Langston finally brings up the subject of college, James says that he wants to send Langston to a college in Switzerland, so that he can learn German and other languages. Then, he can go study mining engineering at a German school, and come join his father in Mexico. Langston is dismayed, and says that he has no interest in engineering. He is bad enough at math in English, much less trying to learn it in a foreign language. James asks what Langston intends to do with himself then, and Langston says that maybe he

will be a writer. In James's opinion, any black people who stay in the United States can never rise above their low position.

Langston stays in Mexico for a year. Various people start paying Langston for English lessons, and soon he is offered teaching positions at two schools. In addition to these, he also privately tutors the children of prominent citizens, and he makes a decent amount of money doing this. He sends some money to his mother, spends a little on the weekends, and saves the rest. Since James is only willing to pay for him to go to college in Europe, Langston decides to save up enough money to travel to Harlem in New York on his own. He wants to go to Columbia University in New York, but more than that he wants to see Harlem, the greatest city of the black Americans. He has heard of the wonderful music that originates in Harlem, and he tells his father how much he would like to go there. James cannot understand, because he hates black people. Langston, on the other hand, thinks that black people are the nicest, most fun people he has ever met, and he loves being surrounded by other black folks. In the evenings, Langston usually hangs out with his Mexican friends, walking around the town looking at girls, and playing pool. He goes to plays, and once in a while a movie. Sometimes he goes to bullfights, and he feels that the sights and sounds of a bullfight, in which the audience watches a man playing with death, are indescribable. He tries writing prose about the bullfights, but it does not convey what he wants it to. However, he writes a lot of poems in Mexico, because he is unhappy. Throughout his life, he only writes at the times when he is unhappy. This brings to mind one of his first poems, which is a tribute to Carl Sandburg. Langston compares Sandburg's words to blood clots falling on the page, indicating that a poem is literally a piece of the author, and that the process of creating poetry is painful.

Part I, Twenty-One,Tragedy at Toluca—Time to Leave

Part I, Twenty-One,Tragedy at Toluca—Time to Leave Summary and Analysis

Langston gets his poetry and articles published in a magazine called "The Crisis." When James sees his son' success, he finally agrees to let Langston go to Columbia University in New York. As Langston is preparing to go, several tragedies befall their village. A man is run down by a trolley car, and a young girl commits suicide by drowning herself in a shallow fountain. One day, while Langston and his father are both out, their German housekeeper is visiting with several German friends in the kitchen. The employer of one of the guests, Gerta, comes in, looking for Langston to kill him. The man shoots Gerta three times, twice in the head, and also shoots Frau Schultz, the housekeeper, in the arm. It turns out that the man is in love with Gerta, and a homicidal maniac. Surprisingly, Gerta lives, after being in a coma for six weeks.

Langston goes to New York, excited to see the Big Apple for the first time. When he first smells the ocean, it is a moving experience for him. However, he does not like college at all. As one of the school's only black students, he is ignored by most of the student body. One of his only friends is Chun, a boy from China, who is just as ostracized. Langston also does not like most of his subjects, so he does not study hard, but passes with acceptable grades. After a year, he decides to quit college, so he writes to James that he will support himself from now one. He happily finds a room in Harlem, and sets out to find a job. His mother also comes to stay with him, having separated from his stepfather.

Langston quickly finds that it is extremely hard for a black person to find a job in New York. Finally, he finds a summer job as a field hand to a small truck farm owned by Greek immigrants. They work him hard, but he saves up enough money for a few weeks' rent in Harlem. Langston works for a few months delivering flowers to the rich and famous, but the job does not pay well, and Langston is treated unfairly by his boss, because he is black. Langston quits, and instead goes and signs up to work as a mess boy on a ship. Looking forward to seeing the world, he is disappointed when he discovers that the ship he will work on is the mother ship of a fleet of broken-down warships, docked in the Hudson river. Langston and the other crew members service the other ships, keeping them from falling apart entirely. Eventually, Langston decides he wants to see the rest of the world, and gets a job on the S. S. Malone, a ship going to Africa. When he tosses his books overboard, he is tossing all the problems he has faced so far—the prejudice, the poverty, the loneliness and confusion.

Part II, Big Sea, Africa—Standee

Part II, Big Sea, Africa—Standee Summary and Analysis

Langston's ship, the S.S. Malone, sails up and down the coast of Africa, taking on passengers, and letting people off. When the sailors have a chance to go ashore, and some money to spend, they go off and get drunk and find prostitutes, complaining that there are only local African girls available. As the trip continues, the sailors get wilder and wilder. Whenever they do not like the food the cook makes, they throw it in the sea, dishes and all, and as a result, food and dish supplies dwindle. Once the ship is in Africa, the crew has hardly any work to do, because they all hire Africans as servants for very low wages. Each of the sailors buys a pet monkey, so there is a huge monkey cage on the deck of the S.S. Malone. Langston's monkey, Jocko, has been freshly captured from the wild, and bites. One day, there is a terrible storm, which smashes the monkey cage. The ship is covered with monkeys, happy to be free again, who treat the ship like their own jungle playground. After several days, they finally recapture most of the monkeys. By the time they get back to America, the food supplies are almost gone, and they do not even have any serving dishes left. The sailors almost mutiny, after eating very wormy oatmeal. When they arrive in New York, the entire crew of the ship is fired. This tale gives a picture of Africa as a wild, vital place. Just as the ship's captain has trouble trying to control his drunken, mutinous crew, so the crew experiences the same frustration with all their monkeys.

Langston plans to stay in New York for only a few days, before taking his mother the money he has saved as a mess boy. He finds a pet shop to board Jocko. He notices an ad for a play featuring a famous actress, whom he has always wanted to see. He decides to stay another ten days in New York, just to see the play. The night of the play, Langston stands in line for hours, and the theater is packed. However, once the famous actress comes on stage, Langston is disappointed, and so is much of the audience. After the wonderful excitement of Africa, Langston discovers that some of the European attractions that have promised to be so wonderful are just ordinary.

Part II, Big Sea, Jocko—Poem

Part II, Big Sea, Jocko—Poem Summary and Analysis

When Langston is ready to go home to his mother's house, he goes to get Jocko from the pet shop. He is dismayed to find that the bill for boarding the monkey is almost all the money he has left. In addition, on the train ride home, he discovers that the train costs more than he had realized, and he does not even have enough money to get home. At the last minute, he sells a pair of pants to one of the porters, and hides the monkey in a bag. When he presents Jocko to his family, they are at first afraid of the monkey. Jocko provides entertainment to the whole town, but Langston's mother hates the monkey, and sells it soon after Langston leaves.

Langston goes off to do more sailing, going on several more international voyages. One of his friends describes Paris to Langston, and Langston decides he needs to spend the winter there. Once he finally gets to Paris, Langston quickly realizes that he has very little money. For several days, he eats practically nothing while searching for a job. He meets a Russian ballerina named Sonya, whose dance troupe has disbanded, and who has even less money than he does. Sonya helps him find the cheapest hotel room in Paris, which is an unheated closet with a bed in it. They room together all winter, eventually finding jobs at nightclubs. At first, they can not find any jobs at all, because unemployment is high, and no one wants to give jobs to foreigners. Finally, Langston gets a job washing dishes at a fancy club called Le Grand Duc, where the rich and famous come to dine. Jazz performers from other nightclubs usually come there after their shifts are over, and have a jam session for several hours. Langston talks about how magical a time it is, hearing so many jazz greats, playing until dawn, and breakfasting on leftover champagne. Langston notices a role reversal in race relations at Le Grand Duc: the headline performer is a black singer from Alabama, named Florence. Although Florence is a friendly, sweet girl, around her white patrons she is openly condescending, cultivating an attitude of snobbishness. Langston realizes that her haughty demeanor is part of her act, and as long as she keeps snubbing them, her audiences will keep coming back for more.

Langston meets an English-African girl named Mary, who has fled to Paris to avoid marrying a prominent army officer. They start dating, and Mary even suggests that they go to Italy and elope, and tell her father to dismiss the officer who wants to marry Mary. Since she plans to continue living on the allowance her father sends her, Langston does not think this plan will work out. Mary's sister shows up to chaperon them, and one day Mary's father sends a doctor to take her back home. Langston and Mary spend one last day together, savoring the time that is almost over. Afterward, Langston writes a poem, comparing love to the momentary pleasures of a dawn. As soon as the sun rises, those fleeting moments will be gone, like a dream.

Part II, Big Sea, Don't Hit a Woman—Distinguished Visitor

Part II, Big Sea, Don't Hit a Woman—Distinguished Visitor Summary and Analysis

There is a pregnant dancer working at Le Grand Duc, who acts badly to the customers. When the boss tries to fire her, the girl is angry, and throws a champagne bucket at him. The boss slaps her to the floor, and Florence flies into a rage that he would hit a woman. The fight quickly becomes a wild brawl, with everyone taking sides over whether it is acceptable to hit a woman. Most of the customers flee, along with much of the staff. Two men carry their fight into the kitchen, where Langston is hiding and watching. Langston survives by climbing on to the icebox, and after the fight, it takes the club staff most of a day to clean up the club. Florence soon quits and starts her own club. Without Florence to draw the crowds, Le Grand Duc has practically no business. They fire most of the waiters, and try to fire Bruce, the huge, one-eyed chef. Bruce threatens the boss with a large butcher knife, and the boss decides to keep Bruce around. Instead, they make Langston into a waiter.

The owner of Le Grand Duc sends for a singer from America to replace Florence, and drum up some business. Bricktop is a very sweet girl, but disappointed when she sees how small the club is, with no customers. For months, there is practically no business at all, which Langston enjoys, because he hardly has to do anything at work. The entertainers from other clubs continue showing up in the early mornings, and as Bricktop gains popularity, some customers even come earlier in the evening, just to hear her sing. Bricktop teaches many of them the brand-new dance from America, the Charleston. Langston points out that Bricktop and Florence are sort of foils for one another. Florence gains her popularity by acting like an untouchable African princess, while Bricktop makes friends everywhere she goes, by being nice to everyone. Although Florence is at first much more successful, Langston reveals that in ten years, Florence will be dying on welfare, and Bricktop will be one of the most popular singers in Paris.

One morning, Lanston is awakened by a visitor. Alain Locke is an important man in publishing, and he has read Langston's poems in "The Crisis." He asks to see some more of Langston's work, wanting to feature it in a magazine called "Survey Graphic." Langston is honored to have Dr. Locke as a visitor, and he tours the Louvre with him and other distinguished gentlemen.

Italy—Poetry is Practical

Italy—Poetry is Practical Summary and Analysis

Le Grand Duc closes for the summer, and Langston goes with some Italian coworkers to Italy for their vacation. He is very popular in the villages of Italy, because they have never seen a black person before, and everyone wants to see and touch Langston. When Langston takes a train back to France, he falls asleep and someone picks his pocket, stealing his money and passport. Stranded in Italy, Langston is unable to find a job, and after hustling on the beaches for a few months, he gets passage on a ship back to New York. He works in exchange for his passage and makes it back to Harlem.

Langston's mother has moved in with some relatives in Washington, D.C., and she encourages Langston to come there too. Langston finds a job working in a laundry in Washington, but he does not like it there. Life in Washington is just as segregated in the Jim Crow South, where there are all kinds of laws to keep black people from eating, drinking, or spending their leisure time near white people. In addition to rampant racial discrimination, the group of "cultured" black people are also snobs, looking down on anyone who works with their hands, or is uneducated and very dark-skinned. These "cultured" people invite Langston to a lot of their functions, proud of his poetry, but they wish that he did not work in a laundry. Langston works as a bus boy for a while, and the famous black poet Vachel Lindsay comes as a guest speaker to the hotel where Langston works. As evidence of the hypocritical racism prevalent at the time, Langston is unable to attend Lindsay's poetry reading, because black people are not allowed in the auditorium where Lindsay will be speaking. Nonetheless, Langston shyly gives Lindsay several of his poems when Lindsay sits down to dinner.

The next morning, when Langston looks at the newspaper, he sees that Vachel Lindsay has discovered a black bus boy poet. There are reporters waiting for him when he gets to work, and often guests want to know who the poet is. This embarrasses Langston to the point that he quits his job and gets a job as a cook. One day, a publisher asks Langston if he has enough poems to publish a book, so Langston sends him a collection of poems. Months later, Langston's first book, "The Weary Blues," is published, the name a reference to the first blues verse Langston ever heard as a child. When Langston mentions to a fan of his poetry, how he wishes he could go back to college, she gives him the gift of a college scholarship. Langston enrolls in Lincoln College, an all-black school, noting that his poems have brought him prosperity, since they led to his scholarship. It is interesting that Langston's poetry gains him acclaim among white people and "cultured" (newly rich) black people, since his poetry explicitly reflects the culture, speech patterns, rhythm, and experience of poor, uneducated, persevering black folks. Many of the rich and powerful people who admire Langston's poetry, and his status as a published poet, look down on the very people and ideas that his poems are about.

When the Negro Was In Vogue—Nigger Heaven

When the Negro Was In Vogue—Nigger Heaven Summary and Analysis

As jazz, blues, and the Charleston gain popularity, it becomes very chic for the upper crust to visit Harlem. Rich white people come to the black district of Harlem to enjoy the performers in the night clubs, but also to people-watch the black customers of the clubs. After being downtrodden for so long, many of the black folks living in Harlem are happy that their day has finally come, and blacks are becoming more acceptable to the wealthy. Langston, however, thinks that it is just a fad, and that as soon as the whites get tired of the novelty of African-American culture, they will stop spending money to enjoy it. He turns out to be right, and when the Depression makes times hard for the whites, they soon stop enjoying the fun of slumming in Harlem. Many of the Harlem residents resent the white presence in their nightclubs anyway, since the whites act like tourists, staring at their fellow customers. Because of this, private parties become very popular. Many events take place late at night, since so many residents work all day. Sometimes, someone will pack their apartment for an evening of gaiety, in order to raise money for the rent. There are also high society parties in Harlem, with guests of different races, often famous writers, musicians, actors, and even royalty.

There is a white man named Carl Van Vechten, who is the only white man to host parties to rival the best Harlem ones. Sometimes, Van Vechten is the only white person at his party, and he is the only one that the people of Harlem are so willing to socialize with. Van Vechten respects and values black culture, and he publishes a book about it, but he makes the mistake of calling the book "Nigger Heaven." This is a play on words, since "nigger heaven" was a term used for the balcony of a theater, which was often the only place black customers were allowed to sit. In Van Vechten's book, he portrays his characters sympathetically and realistically, but hardly anyone finds that out, because no one is willing to read it. The book is banned by most black people, except Langston, because everyone hates the title so much. Langston explains, "The word 'nigger', you see, sums up for us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America: the slave-beatings of yesterday, the lynchings of today, the Jim Crow cars, the only movie show in town with its sign up FOR WHITES ONLY, the restaurants where you may not eat, the jobs you may not have, the unions you cannot join." (Part III, Black Renaissance, Ch. 8, Nigger Heaven, p. 269)

Around the same time, Langston also publishes his own book of poetry about the black experience, and he also chooses a racially misleading title. Langston calls his book "Fine Clothes to the Jew," in reference to selling one's best clothing to a pawn shop when one has no money left. "The Jew" indicates a pawnbroker. Unsurprisingly, Jews do not appreciate a title that appears to be somewhat antisemitic, and black people do

not bother to read a book that seems to be about Jews. The critics hate Langston's book, but ten years later, many black schools and colleges use poems from the book, as their texts.

Spectacles in Color—Not Without Laughter

Spectacles in Color—Not Without Laughter Summary and Analysis

In addition to the many performances and parties in Harlem, the special events, like weddings and funerals, are an even bigger spectacle. The events of some of Harlem's most prominent residents are so popular that crowds form in the streets, since buildings are filled to absolute capacity. One spectacle that Langston remembers is an annual ball where all the guests dress as the opposite sex, and the men have a beauty pageant.

Langston starts attending Lincoln College, which he likes very much. The only thing that really bothers him about it is that there are no black staff or faculty. Since the purpose of the college is to prepare black leaders, it seems to Langston that at least one of those graduates should be a good enough leader to qualify to teach there, or at least serve on the board. Hazing is rampant on the campus, because the faculty and staff have no contact with the student body outside of class hours. Since Langston is a published poet, many of his classmates assume that others will go easy on him, so everyone ends up hazing Langston far worse than average. One popular prank at the school is to wait until someone walks by a window in their best clothes, and then throw several buckets of water on them.

When summer break comes, Langston is invited to read his poems in Tennessee, at a university, and in Texas, at a Y.W.C.A. Langston does not end up going to Texas, because the Mississippi River is flooding, and traveling there is impossible. Instead, Langston decides to tour the South, having never really been there, and he heads to Memphis, Tennessee. Langston's classmates, traveling with him, know that he is not used to the Jim Crow laws of the South, so they play jokes on him. For instance, they tell him that it is against the law for a black man to wear sunglasses. Langston believes them, because he has heard of the unfair treatment that blacks receive in the South. As the flood rises, many people have to go to refugee camps, and Langston notices the appalling differences in care provided by the Red Cross. While white refugees get three meals a day in a barracks, black refugees get two meals and have to stay in tiny tents, in a field ankle-deep in mud. Not only that, but when the waters are rising, whites take all the available boats to flee in, leaving their black servants and workers to fend for themselves, on makeshift rafts, or on rooftops. Langston feels that the treatment of the races in Baton Rouge during the flood perfectly epitomizes the attitude in the South toward race.

Back at school, Langston is invited to participate in an interracial conference. He notes that interracial conferences in the United States bring up all kinds of problems that are not existent outside the U.S.A. The whites who run the conferences are always worried about where the blacks should eat and sleep, so that everything will be proper. In fact,

one time when Langston and another black man are speaking for such a group, a special table is set up just for the guests, so that white people will not have to eat at the same table as blacks. This seems especially stupid to Langston after spending so much time in Europe, Africa, and Mexico. He knows that people of different races can eat together and sleep together in close quarters, with no harmful effects. Another issue that often comes up is the problem of intermarriage, and what to do about it. This is also a tiresome issue for Langston, so at the conference, he decides that it is time to talk about something practical, rather than theorizing about Jim Crow laws. Langston points out to his hosts that there are no black students attending their college, and there never have been. He asks why this is, since they seem interested in what black people have to contribute. The college faculty does not know what to say, and rather than admitting that they do not admit blacks because they are racist, they decide that the only logical solution is to pray about the issue. Langston recognizes this as a cop-out, to avoid answering the tough questions he has raised.

Langston writes his first novel, called "Not Without Laughter." It is based on what he considers to be the common experiences of a rural black family in Kansas. He does not base the novel on his own youth, because he thinks that his experience was somewhat unusual, based on his mixed racial heritage. Instead, Langston tries to recreate what was going on in the other families he knew as a child. The title refers to the times in life when crying seems like the only thing to do, so one laughs to keep from crying. This is a very poignant metaphor, since it involves taking joy from pain, because pain is the only thing available for the taking. It also represents the resilient spirit of Langston's people, who keep fighting even after receiving many setbacks.

Alma Mater—Post Script

Alma Mater—Post Script Summary and Analysis

During his senior year at Lincoln College, Langston is required to do a comprehensive project on some aspect of human life. Langston chooses his own college campus as a research topic, and polls his fellow students as to what they think of the way things are run. Langston shows that a majority of the students believe that it is good that the faculty and board of trustees are all white. In fact, many students openly say that they do not think that black people can be good teachers, simply because they are morally, mentally, or culturally inferior. Langston exposes this attitude, and points out to any readers that the purpose of Lincoln College is supposedly to train black leaders. Langston suggests that every college should have a mix of black and white faculty. Langston's report is received with controversy, and at first, people criticize him for complaining about a system that benefits him. Also, many Southern schools for black children write to the college, saying that they do not want Lincoln graduates for teachers, since Lincoln students think that blacks are too stupid to teach. However, ten years later, there are black faculty, board members, and teachers at the Lincoln College.

Langston develops a close friendship with a delightful, very old, white lady. She lives on Park Avenue, and is very wealthy, and generous with her wealth. She learns of Langston's writing, and becomes his patron. The old lady still believes in modern ideas, and she very much wants to help the black literature movement. Although she patronizes other artists and writers, as well as giving generously to charity, she is very modest, and never allows her name to be mentioned. She subsidizes Langston while he writes "Not Without Laughter," and also helps him edit his projects. As the Depression comes along, Langston starts to feel guilty about enjoying the old lady's luxuries when so many people are homeless and starving. He also realizes that his patron wants him to write things that reflect the "primitive," since she believes that black people are more closely connected to the primitive. Langston, however, does not feel especially primitive, and since he knows he cannot be what she wants him to be, he decides to stop taking money from her. He tells her this one day, and asks her if they can still remain friends, instead. She tells him that she does not value him for his friendship but for his writing, and makes him leave.

Langston is so angry about it that he feels very sick, and spends the rest of his patron's money on doctors, trying to determine why he feels so bad. Langston does not confess to the doctors that he is just emotionally upset, but wastes his money instead. As soon as he is out of the old lady's money, he feels much better. It seems that for a while, Langston and the old lady have a relationship like that of a master and servant, so that the old lady takes good care of him, as long as he is willing to play the role she wants for him. When Langston tries to stand up for himself and be a man, making his own decisions about what to write, the lady has no use for him. The reason Langston gets so sick, is because he has been allowing himself to play the lady's servant, and his spirit recoils against such subjugation. This is similar to the inflammatory way Langston

presents his senior paper, drastically highlighting the hypocrisy of white people who want to benefit the cause of black people, but only as long as the blacks do what they are told. After separating from the old lady, Langston decides to make writing his life's work.

Characters

Langston Hughes

Langston considers himself a Negro, a black man, but his heritage is a mixture of white, black, Jewish, and American Indian. Langston loves books, and often considers books more real than people. He starts writing poetry early in his school years, and continues writing poems whenever he is unhappy. Langston likes to have fun with his peers, regardless of what race they are. Langston works hard, but he is terrible with money, often wasting his hard-earned and much-needed funds on things like room and board for a monkey. Langston hates for others to tell him what to think, and if he feels that he is being pushed too far in a direction that he does not want to go, he will rebel, sometimes by becoming physically ill. Langston lives the life of a vagabond, drifting from place to place as the opportunity affords it, and often settling for a while in a nexus of culture and art. Langston loves the hearty, vibrant culture of African Americans, and he tries to represent it accurately in his poetry and prose. Langston is a giving person, and is happy to share whatever he has, even if he is on the brink of starvation. Many people see the potential in young Langston and decide that they want to develop it to their own ends, but Langston must follow his own direction.

Mary Sampson Patterson, Langston's Grandmother

Mary Sampson Patterson is Langston's grandmother on his mother's side. She is half Cherokee Indian and half French, and during the days of slavery, she has free papers and can travel about freely. She is a proud woman, and so she never takes in washing or cooks for white people, or acts as a servant to anyone. Because of this, they are very poor, and often have trouble paying the mortgage on her house. She raises Langston for most of his childhood, so that his mother can find work in other cities. Often, Langston's grandmother rents out part or all of her house to boarders to make ends meet, and sometimes she and Langston run out of food. She has a passion for freedom, having married Langston's grandfather in part because he cared so much about setting the black people free. She understands that life is filled with hardships, but she never thinks that crying is the solution to any problem. She works hard, reads her Bible, and tells exciting stories to Langston. Because of the way she has taught him, Langston does not cry when his grandmother dies.

Auntie Reed

Auntie Reed is a family friend who takes Langston in when his grandmother dies. She loves Langston, and makes him go to church. She is overjoyed when Langston pretends to be saved.

Langston's Mother

Langston's mother is not around for much of his growing up years because she tries to find work in other cities. She complains when Langston wants to travel the world and go to college instead of getting a job and helping support the family.

James Hughes, Langston's Father

Langston's father moves to Mexico when Langston is a child, and makes a lot of money there. He cares only about money, and he is always telling everyone to hurry up.

Kit Clark

Kit is Langston's half-brother, who is many years younger than Langston. Langston brings Kit a pet monkey from Africa.

Homer Clark, Langston's Stepfather

Langston's mother remarries, and Langston's stepfather is a much nicer man than Langston's father. They are always poor, and he is always trying to find a better job.

Sonya

Sonya is a Russian ballerina that Langston meets in Paris. They are so poor that they move in together the day they meet, and they try to scrape together enough money to eat.

Bricktop

Bricktop is a singer who comes to work in the Paris club where Langston is a waiter. She becomes a jazz sensation, and is famous for the rest of her life.

The Lady on Park Avenue

Langston becomes friends with a very wealthy, very old white lady, who becomes his patron. She does not want anyone to know her name so that her donations can be anonymous.

Carl Van Vechten

Carl Van Vechten is a white man who is very prominent in black high society. He makes the mistake of titling his book, "Nigger Heaven."

Objects/Places

S. S. Malone

The S. S. Malone is the first ship that Langston ever works aboard. It takes him to Africa.

Paris

Langston spends a winter in Paris, starving and enjoying the jazz scene.

Jocko the Monkey

Langston gets a monkey in Africa, and smuggles it home to his brother Kit as a gift. After a week, Jocko is sold to a pet shop.

Africa

Langston loves visiting Africa, although he finds it disconcerting that everyone there calls him a white man.

Italy

Langston gets trapped in Italy when his money and passport are stolen on a train while he sleeps. He is homeless the entire time he is waiting to find a way out of the country.

Mexico

Langston's father has Langston come live with him in Mexico. Langston hates it there, and teaches English until he has enough money to leave.

Harlem

Harlem is just about the only area of New York where black people can live in the 1920s, so it is also the home of the Black Renaissance.

The Black Renaissance

For a while in the 1920s, African-American culture was thriving and producing exciting new art and music that influenced the culture all around them.

The Great Depression

The Great Depression started with the stock market crash in 1929 and continued until after World War II. The fun of the Roaring Twenties was over.

Lincoln College

Langston gets a scholarship to go to Lincoln, an all-black college. In his senior year, he does a project criticizing the fact that there are no black teachers there.

Columbia University

Langston goes to Columbia for a year after high school, before deciding that he would rather support himself as a seaman.

The South

Langston travels to the Southern United States, and he is appalled at the flagrant racism there.

Themes

The Black Renaissance

The 1920s were an exciting, vibrant time for black music. Jazz, blues and ragtime were breaking out of vaudeville and taking the world by storm. It was a lot of fun for everyone who had the energy to stay up all night, dancing, working, laughing, drinking, and playing the new music until dawn. Langston travels to two important centers of the so-called Black Renaissance. In Paris, the races are not so separate, and Langston works as a dishwasher and waiter in an important jazz club, Le Grand Duc. All of Paris's black musicians come there after working all evening in other clubs, and jam together until the sun comes up, and they all drink leftover champagne for breakfast. Langston describes one of the many performers, epitomizing the spirit of the new black music: "Miss [Gladys] Bentley was an amazing exhibition of musical energy—a large, masculine lady, whose feet pounded the floor while her fingers pounded the keyboard—a perfect piece of African sculpture, animated by her own rhythm." (Part III, Black Renaissance, Ch. 1, When the Negro Was In Vogue, p. 226)

The other cultural center of the Black Renaissance is Harlem, in New York. For a few years, it is popular for white people to come to the nightclubs to hear the black performers, and to stare at the black patrons. It becomes cool for whites to come to black people's private parties and listen to black music. The roaring twenties dance along with huge parties, weddings, and funerals. Underneath the glitter, however, there is still a lot of prejudice and poverty. Langston suspects that this new-found popularity is only a fad, and when the Depression hits, the whites quickly stop concerning themselves with what is going on in Harlem. Most of the music on the radio today is directly descended from the music of the Black Renaissance.

Coming of Age

"The Big Sea" is not a book about the author's entire life, but only about his first twenty-five years or so. He talks a little about his childhood, but most of the book focuses on Langston's adolescence and early adulthood. It also follows his literary career from his first exposure to books and poetry, to the day he finally decides to be a writer for a living. He uses the Big Sea as a metaphor both for life, and as a metaphor for literature. The sea represents freedom to travel the world as a man, and the day Langston first embarks on his first voyage, he feels that it is the first day of his adult life. He muses, "I wanted to be a man on my own, control my own life, and go my own way. I was twenty-one" (Part I, Twenty-One, Ch. 22, Time to Leave, p. 98).

Since he throws all of his books into the water, this reinforces the metaphor of books and the sea. Since Langston has only been studying courses for engineering, because his father wants him to be an engineer, his books also represent his father's authority

and desire to tell Langston how to live his life. Later, Langston refers to the world of literature as a big sea, filled with all sorts of things that he can write.

Many times, people see potential in Langston and try to tell him how to live in order to bring out his potential. Each time, Langston eventually rebels, refusing to pretend to be what someone else wants him to be. Many people, white or black, feel that he can help out his race so much if only he will follow their plan. His father wants him to study mining engineering in Germany. His Auntie wants him to let Jesus save him from his sins. His classmates want him to write poetry because they think black people have a natural talent for rhythm and expression. His teachers want him to be quiet and submit to their white authority. The black literary community wants him to represent wholesome, happy, successful black characters. His elderly white patron wants him to write like a primitive. Each time someone tries to force their will upon Langston, he stands up for himself, becoming more of a man each time.

What It Means to Be Black

Having been born at the beginning of the twentieth century, Langston grows up in a world where black people have a distinct disadvantage. It is hard for them to get good jobs, or own land, or get a good education, in part because of Jim Crow laws, and also because of racial prejudice surrounding them. Langston notes that in Africa, "black" means "having very dark skin," while in America, anyone with any African blood is considered "black" or "Negro." Langston knows many black people who have a contempt for their own race and do what they can to distance themselves from poor or uneducated blacks. Langston does not understand the attitude of these people and thinks that the laughter and liveliness of black folks is a wonderful, warm thing. When Langston travels in the South, he encounters many refugees because the Mississippi is flooding all the way down to New Orleans, something that still happens today. When Langston sees the penniless blacks, he says that, "They seemed to me like the gayest and bravest people possible—these Negroes from the Southern ghettoes—facing tremendous odds, working and laughing and trying to get somewhere in the world" (Part I, Twenty-One, Ch. 9, I've Known Rivers, pp. 54-55). Langston admires the way these people can look at the shambles their lives are in and laugh rather than cry, because laughter is better than crying. Langston does his best to represent the spirit of the American black people in his writings, often writing in a black dialect, about issues that black people face. Sometimes he receives criticism for his portrayals, but he does his best to represent the people he knows.

Style

Perspective

As the title "The Big Sea: an Autobiography by Langston Hughes" indicates, the book is told by Langston, the first-person narrator. For the most part, the narrator knows only what Langston himself knew at the time, although he wrote it ten years later. Thus, he often remarks on the status of certain people ten years later, which provides an interesting comparison to what the characters expect to happen. Langston undeniably has an African-American perspective, although when the book was written, people usually said "Negro" or "colored." Langston experiences what it is like to be black in America, what it is like to be mistaken for a Mexican near the border of Mexico, how it feels to be called white in Africa, and how to get along with any old race on the beaches of Italy. Because of his light skin tone and mixed racial heritage, groups of people tend to make different assumptions about Langston's race, depending on where he is. Langston has the added perspective of being raised by a Cherokee woman, who fills him with pride in self-sufficiency. Being raised by poor people in the early twentieth century, Langston learns early on to work hard and to enjoy money and comfort when they are available. Once Langston has surprised everyone by becoming a successful writer, he is determined to help the cause of racial equality, and he does what he can to open people's eyes.

Tone

The tone of the book is well reflected in the title of Langston Hughes's first novel, "Not Without Laughter." Langston always admires the courage and pluck he observes in the poor black people around him, who can struggle through the most difficult of circumstances, and weather the harshest of storms. He notes that sometimes life is so hard that the only way to keep from crying is to laugh instead. He sees poverty, hunger, unemployment, and prejudice everywhere, often hiding just behind some sparkling spectacle. Rather than giving in to despair, these characters laugh at their troubles and sing the blues, funneling their pain into their music, to make beautiful, moving art. Langston also creates something good out of pain, since he only writes when he is unhappy. When the Black Renaissance comes to Harlem, none of the characters know how long the good times will last, so they party while they still can. As a result, a dark humor emerges, since so many happy events happen close to death or poverty. The residents of Harlem are survivors, making it through good times and bad by poking fun at scenes from their own lives. Langston tries to reproduce this tone in his own writing, by using the same dialects as black folks, and by structuring many of his poems in the form of blues verses.

Structure

"The Big Sea" is divided into three parts, each emphasizing a certain phase of Langston's early life. The first part, "Twenty-One," is divided into nineteen short chapters. Most chapters in the book are just a few pages, although some are much longer, and some are less than a page. "Twenty-One" begins with Langston being twenty-one years old, and then he flashes back to his entire childhood, leading up to his first sea voyage as part of a ship's crew. Even though Langston has jobs starting at a very young age, and sometimes lives on his own when he is in high school, he considers everything leading up to his departure for Africa to be his childhood, because he is finally making his own decisions, going against his father's wishes. Part II is "Big Sea," which is divided into twenty-six chapters. This chronicles Langston's travels to Africa and Europe, enjoying seeing the world, and also enjoying the jazz movement in Paris. As a young man, Langston often behaves very wildly, and at the end of the section, his poetry has begun to pay some of his bills, and provide opportunities to him. The final part is "Black Renaissance," which has twenty-three chapters. It discusses the effects of the Black Renaissance in Harlem, and also how this winds down when the Depression changes everything. Langston finally finishes college in this part, and gets a novel published, having finally decided on a career path. Although this is the end of the Black Renaissance and the Roaring Twenties, it is only the beginning of Langston's writing career. Just as his writing is still popular today, so also the effects of the Black Renaissance can be seen throughout American culture.

Quotes

"So I learned early on not to hate ALL white people. And ever since, it has seemed to me that MOST people are generally good, in every race and in every country where I have been." Part I, Twenty-One, Ch. 2, Negro, p. 14

"Then it was that books began to happen to me, and I began to believe in nothing but books and the wonderful world in books—where if people suffered, they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables, as we did in Kansas." Part I, Twenty-One, Ch. 2, Negro, p. 16

"In America most white people think, of course, that ALL Negroes can sing and dance, and have a sense of rhythm." Part I, Twenty-One, Ch. 4, The Mother of Gracchi, p. 24

"At the end of the first day, she said: 'Ah never come across an educated Ne-gre before.'" Part I, Twenty-One, Ch. 16, Departure, p. 79

"Of course, later I was to run into much of that sort of thing in my grown-up travels in America, that strange astonishment on the part of so many whites that a Negro should expect any of the common courtesies and conveniences that other Americans enjoy." Part I, Twenty-One, Ch. 18, p. 82

"Sometimes life is a ripe fruit too delicious for the taste of man: the full moon hung low over Buruntu and it was night on the Nigerian delta." Part II, Big Sea, Ch. 4, Buruntu Moon, p. 117

". . . I began to say to myself that I guess dreams do come true, and sometimes life makes its own books, because here I am living in a Paris garret, writing poems and having champagne for breakfast . . ." Part II, Big Sea, Ch. 14, Paris in the Spring, p. 163

"Bruce said, 'Life's a bitch, but you can beat it if you try.'" Part II, Big Sea, Ch. 17, Bricktop, p. 178

"And I found that there were plenty of poor people in Venice and plenty of back alleys off canals too dirty to be picturesque." Part II, Big Sea, Ch. 21, Italy, p. 190

"(But with all his profanity, the Old Man did not use a single racial epithet. So I sort of always liked him for that afterwards.)" Part II, Big Sea, Ch. 23, Workaway, p. 200

"Folks! Start with nothing sometime and see how long it takes to work up to something." Part II, Big Sea, Ch. 24, Washington Society, p. 205

"Strangely undemocratic doings take place in the shadow of 'the world's greatest democracy.'" Part II, Big Sea, Ch. 24, Washington Society, p. 206

"The 1920s were the years of Manhattan's black Renaissance." Part III, Black Renaissance, Ch. 1, When the Negro Was In Vogue, p. 223

"All of us know that the gay and sparkling life of the so-called Negro Renaissance of the '20's was not so gay and sparkling beneath the surface as it looked." Part III, Black Renaissance, Ch. 1, When the Negro Was In Vogue, p. 227

"In her youth she was always getting scholarships and things from wealthy white people, some of whom simply paid her just to sit around and represent the Negro race for them, she did it in such a racy fashion." Part III, Black Renaissance, Ch. 2, Harlem Literati, p. 239

"His implication was that 'things are got out of white folks' by flattery, cajolery, good-natured begging, lying, and general Uncle Toming—not by truth." Part III, Black Renaissance, Ch. 17, Alma Mater, pp. 309-310

"Literature is a big sea full of many fish. I let down my nets and pulled.
I'm still pulling." Part III, Black Renaissance, Ch. 23, Postscript, p. 335

Topics for Discussion

What does writing mean to Langston? How do you express yourself?

The 1920s were a very important time for music. How did the Black Renaissance influence modern music?

Various people in "The Big Sea" have different attitudes toward money. Describe the financial attitudes of several characters.

How does race affect Langston's life? What race do you consider Langston Hughes to be? What race do you consider yourself to be? What is the dividing line between races?

What are some of the places that Langston goes to on boats, and what does he learn in those places?

What is Langston's mother's attitude toward his education? Do you agree with it? What do you think of Langston's father's attitude toward education?

What are some of the different jobs that Langston holds? What effect do they have on his life?

Why does Langston throw his books overboard at the beginning of the book? Have you ever destroyed something to prove a point?