

Harlem Gallery Study Guide

Harlem Gallery by Melvin B. Tolson

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Rendezvous With America

Rendezvous With America Summary

The poem "Rendezvous With America," discusses how great people from all over the world flock to America. These men stem from all ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds. They were brave and took the major risks to move to this new land called America. To the narrator, America is every man's country. It is a country for white men such as Daniel Boone and Jesse James. It is a country for Jews such as Louis Brandeis, a US Supreme Court Justice. It is a country for Italians such as La Guardia who was the visionary mayor of New York City. It is a country for Asians such as writer Lin Yutang. It is a country for Slavic peoples such as the famous conductor Stokowski. And lastly, America is a country for black people such as abolitionist Fred Douglass.

America is also a great power that makes you laugh or causes you great pain. There are bad men in America too such as the Ku Klux Klan and anti-Semites. The narrator says he has a rendezvous at three historical places. They are Plymouth Rock, Valley Forge, and Pearl Harbor. All of these places have tested great American men, in which they've battled obstacles and left a legacy for all Americans. The narrator ends the poem discussing how he hears America with the sound of industry such as the sounds a cotton gin or an oil drill in the South. In the end, America stands as a united country that continues to be tested and overcomes challenges throughout the ages.

Rendezvous With America Analysis

In "Rendezvous With America," the narrator alludes to many great men who have helped sculpt America. He sees America as a melting pot and describes the people that form this melting pot. In particular, the men he chooses are of great substance and importance. Yet when he refers to the common man, or the working class people, he lumps them in groups without referring to them by name but by sounds. For example, those who work in the cotton gin are identified by the sound the gin makes. Therefore, the sound of each job symbolizes the working man's contributions to America and not the actual laborer.

Tolson also chooses three locations to take a rendezvous. They are Plymouth Rock, Valley Forge and Pearl Harbor. The first two focus on the struggle of the white man, who Tolson acknowledges is the founder of America. However, the last reference of Pearl Harbor is a sorrowful event for all men of every color. It is one he will never forget. Pearl Harbor upsets him most as black men die there too. In these locations, the reader sees the transition from an all-white society to one of mixed races. This is a time line of America for Tolson.

Tolson alludes to Gethsemanes and Golgothas. Gethsemane is the Jerusalem garden where Jesus and his disciples prayed the night before the Jesus' Crucifixion. Golgotha



is the hill in Jerusalem where Jesus' Crucifixion took place. Tolson makes these two religious references at the end of the poem to say that all men descend from Jesus and America is composed of these descendants.



Woodcuts for Americana Poems

Woodcuts for Americana Poems Summary

In "The Mountain Climber," the mountain climber risks his life to scale a mountain. Through wind, snow and rugged terrain, he braves to climb the mountain. There are warnings such as funeral vultures and a skull rotting from another climber who died before him. He still climbs however. Tolson repeats the same stanza at the beginning and ending of the poem and ends both stanzas with a question mark. He questions why the mountain climber chooses to risk his life time and time again.

In "Old Man Michael," there is an old white farmer. He looks frail and ghostly. The tares, or evil roots, of wheat hurt his feet. The black men laugh at him until the farmer says to stop blaming the weather and natural world for the bad wheat crop. Instead, the tares are the problem, and when these tares cannot be separated from the wheat, the crop will die.

In "When Great Dogs Fight," a mongrel, or mixed breed dog, looks wretched and fearful. Other dogs walk by him of great pedigree such as a bulldog and mastiff. They devour meat, yet the mongrel starves. The mongrel stands on the other side on an iron fence. The pedigree dogs fight violently over a bone on the inside of the fence. The mongrel reaches in and grabs the bone and leaves safely in the street.

In "My Soul and I," the narrator sits alone on a shore and watches the sun set. Seagulls fly by as night descends. The night closes in and it is dream time for him and his soul.

In "An Ex-Judge at the Bar," the narrator goes to a bar and asks the bartender for two drinks straight-up: one for him and one for the bartender. The bartender judges him for killing a black soldier in the Flanders Field battle of World War I. The bartender calls him a hypocrite since the man is black. The man replies no one is perfect and he should not be accused of being a hypocrite. At the end of the poem, he orders three drinks: one for himself, one for the bartender and one for the dead black soldier.

In "Whence?" the oar of a canoe and the rigging of a boat hurt a person's skill. The sun of the valley zaps energy and how will one walk the rugged terrain of the mountain at night? A timber wolf cries and one gives himself to St. Vitus's dance, another name for a neurological disorder. How can he have courage to face a mountain lion?

In "The Town of Fathers," the town fathers meet at the courthouse square on July 4th. Fireworks go off in the background. The mayor says they need a town slogan. The sheriff gives suggestions, but the others hate them. The judge gives a Latin slogan, which the mayor ponders. A neon sign is erected. It reads, "The Blackest Land / And The Whitest People" (pg. 22.)

In "The Furlough" the narrator says he comes back to his beautiful lover's golden bed to possess it. He sees other eager men who want to sleep with his lover as well. But the



narrator was away fighting for his country in the war. A fellow soldier committed treason and honor, love and duty went by the wayside. The narrator feels his home is his castle and he does not achieve victory at home or while fighting abroad in the war. He goes home and chokes his lover and she dies. It is not the worst thing to happen, since what occurs in a soldier's brain is much worse.

In "The Man Inside" the narrator is told that a white man is strictly white and a black man is strictly black. Africans are scarred and marked by their black skin. The gulfs separate these two races and the black man is banned to an island. The narrator yearns for Africa, where other blacks live. The isolation is killing him on this island. A typhoon hits the island and the white man throws him a rope and saves him. They are on common ground now and no man is solely black or white.

In "Old House" Aunt Martha cleans the junk out of her house. She cleans with gusto and fury. The old people watch her. The house grows less occupied. Even the ghost of Lazarus' mouse is not welcome. (Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead as a miracle.) At the end of the poem, Aunt Martha shouts that old homes need to be cleaned.

In "The Poet" the poet is humble. He polishes his poetry for free and without payment. He does not need praise to write. He is above pride and vanity. The poet describes reality and delves into the human soul. He writes in dialects and symbols. He is an Ishmaelite, or a wanderer or outcast. He writes about you and your private matters. He unlocks mysteries and he is the champion of the people. In the end, the poet is a martyr and he needs freedom.

In "Esperanto" people near and far do not see their identity as a whole. They speak their own languages, but when in hell, there is only one language of sorrow. Despite where men come from, they are one. The fatherland is the earth and the race of all people is humanity. The free man should chop down the roots of evil so the children can be free.

In "Views" a man sees a beautiful lawn. But you see the dirt and trash of the alleyway. The man looks at the front of the house, but you view the back of the house. He calls you a quack and you do the same.

In "The Unknown Soldier" the narrator says he was a soldier in many locations. The United States originates from its founding fathers. He fights for these founding fathers, although he says they are tyrants. He witnesses history in the making and how the US grows. He knows the US is virtuous and sinful at the same time. The tares, or evil roots, and wheat grow together. The rose and the thorn grow together. However, liberty should separate them and uproot the evil. He is an unknown soldier who wants freedom. He wants peace.

Woodcuts for Americana Poems Analysis

In "The Mountain Climber," Tolson alludes to a Rubicon. He draws a parallel between the mountain climber's perils to the plight of Julius Caesar. Caesar crossed the Rubicon river in present-day Italy and his crossing was considered an act of war. Thus, the



mountain climber's battle with the mountain symbolizes going to battle. Keeping with the theme of America, the mountain climber symbolizes the every man in America who bravely risks life and limb to immigrate here and claws his way to the top. It is the story of every American.

In "Old Man Michael," the tares refer to the Parable of Tares or the Parable of Wheat told by Jesus in the New Testament. In this Parable, final judgment day will come. The angels will separate the tares, or evil human beings, from the wheat, good human beings. The allusion of the tares symbolize the separation of the good people and the bad people. As in "Rendezvous with America," Tolson says there are good people, those men who make America better, and the bad people, those who are racist and prejudice. Thus, if the bad people, or the tares, take over, America and all its stands for will be destroyed.

In "When Great Dogs Fight," the mongrel represents the every man in America. He is the good, working man who starves because he does things in an honest and good way. He is not violent or proud. He is peaceful and humble. When proud men fight, such as the pedigree dogs, the small, good man, such as the mongrel, will always win.

"My Soul and I" is dedicated To Ruth. The poem has a romantic quality. As the night descends, it seems like the end of a relationship. Sadness intertwines his words as he parallels the sun to golden pyres. A pyre is a wooden funeral structure to burn bodies and originates from Greece. The relationship ends completely as the pyres burn. Tolson alludes to Venetian blinds, a symbol of shutting out the light, and therefore, the relationship. Ruth may be gone, but he has the land, he has America.

In "An Ex-Judge at the Bar," the narrator wants a drink straight-up, or to talk honestly. The bartender, who represents law, justice, and morality, accuses him of being a hypocrite. The narrator is a black man who fought in World War I in France and killed a black enemy soldier. The narrator feels extreme guilt for his action, but says no one is perfect. He alludes to Macduff, the antagonist in Shakespeare's play Macbeth. Macduff suspects Macbeth of plotting to kill the king, thus Macduff kills Macbeth at the end of the play. Macduff symbolizes how justice can be twisted and end tragically, which is similar to what happened with the narrator. In the last stanza of the poem, the narrator orders three drinks for himself, the bartender and the dead black soldier. Therefore, justice has been served and the narrator feels less guilty.

"Whence?" is one of Tolson's most obscure poems. He comments on the courage and bravery of a man who is scared. He cannot row a boat. The mere sun zaps his energy and he succumbs to a neurological disorder. If man is this weak, how can he be brave enough to face the real tests of life? Perhaps Tolson comments on those who face racism and prejudice. If they are scared to speak out, they cannot fight against the powers that be or the people who are prejudice against them. Only true bravery will make America a free land for everyone.

"The Town of Fathers" is social commentary on how the white, good ole' boys or old boys' club makes the rules of the town. As Tolson mentions, despite the Confederacy



long gone, it is still this way in America at this time period. The three town fathers put hardly any thought into the decision, including the town's inhabitants. The result is an offensive neon billboard. The black land refers to the land's fertility for growing crops. This is in direct opposition to the white people. Thus, the black citizens are merely a throw away, not a part of the human population, and closer to being the dirt of the land.

In "The Furlough," the narrator leaves his lover to go off to war in another country. Most likely, Tolson refers to World War I here. When he is abroad, he receives double blows. A fellow soldier commits treason and disappoints him greatly. His lover most likely has an affair with someone else. The narrator feels cheated on both fronts. Tolson alludes to Gilead, which means hill of testimony in the Bible. Therefore, this is his testimony to war — he can't win either way. In the end, war never ends well. He goes home and kills his lover. He comments that killing is nothing compared to what is going on in his brain. This is social commentary for war of how a soldier returns in horrible mental condition and cannot deal with his life. The war has ruined him.

"The Man Inside" is in memory of V.F. Calverton. Calverton is a virtually unknown literary figure. He was the editor of the literary magazine *Modern Quarterly* from 1923 to 1940. More importantly, Calverton also wrote on Marxism. In this poem, Tolson discusses the theory of Marxism where everyone is equal, both the black man and white man. But in reality, it is not so. The black man is banished to an island. When the white man reaches out to save him, just as in Marxism where everyone helps each other, they are no longer two men of separate races. Inside, they are just men, not separated by color. The man inside is without racial boundaries and can live peacefully with everyone.

"Old Houses" is social commentary on how older people's ways and thoughts must be cleaned out of their heads. This must be done in order to bring in new, progressive thoughts. Tolson's social commentary refers to older, white conservative Americans who are racist. He wants them to clean out the racist mindset of their heads, such as Aunt Martha does with her house, and do so with vigor. He wants to leave room in their heads for a new school of thought to accept all men, including black citizens.

In "The Poet," Tolson comments on how the poet is humble, not greedy and a martyr to society. For Tolson, the poet represents an ideal person, who tells the truth and searches for freedom. He is an Ishmaelite, or a constant wanderer or outcast, but still he presses on to find the truth of society through his poetry. To Tolson, the poet is an American hero.

In "Esperanto," the actual word Esperanto is a made-up language. It was invented by a Polish man. It is composed of the word roots of the commonly used European languages. Thus, in the poem, the language of all the men of this Earth is Esperanto. Man does not need separate identities i.e. black, Slavic, Jewish, etc. Instead, man should come together as one and speak the combined language of Esperanto. In hell, in Gehenna, the Jewish word for hell, everyone will only speak the language of sorrow anyway. In the end, those with power must erase all the evil from the world to allow all men to be free — for the sake of future generations.



In "Views," the man and you, the reader, have different views of a house and a lawn. He sees the beauty, but you see the dirt and grime. This symbolizes how people view others from different races. A black man sees one thing about a white man and vice-versa. They never see the same image, nor can they agree on the image. At the end of the poem, both the man and you call each other a charlatan and a quack. This symbolizes the two races will never have the same views on anything.

In "The Unknown Soldier," the narrator, as a soldier, sees the good and evil of the world. Many times they are interwoven and cannot be separated such as the tares and the wheat, the rose and the thorn are symbols of this. Tolson alludes to a Gordian knot. To cut a Gordian knot means to act decisively and quickly. Thus, the narrator wants to quickly attack the problem of eliminating the evil from this world. He says liberty can uproot this evil. In the end, we all deserve to be free because we have all fought as soldiers for our freedom. The narrator will not rest. He will remain as a wandering ghost until peace amongst different races rules America.



Dark Symphony

Dark Symphony Summary

The poem "Dark Symphony" is separated into six parts. The first part "Allegro Moderato" discusses how Black Crispus Attucks is a hero. Attucks was the first martyr of the American Revolution to die in the Boston Massacre. Attucks was a black man. The narrator says Attucks is more important than Patrick Henry, a white man and historical figure. As black men stood at the auction block in times of slavery, they created a brotherhood through tragedy. In the end, the black man is more resilient and less greedy than the white man.

The second part "Lento Grave" discusses the slavery in Civil War times, and how slaves sang as they were in the slave ships, being tortured or escaping to the North.

The third part "Andante Sostenuto" says the white man tells the black man to forget about slavery. Forgetting however is spurning democracy for black people. Blacks were enslaved for three hundred years and they have the right to remember. How can the white man tell them to forget such brutality?

The fourth part "Tempo Primo" discusses the new black man, or black heroes such as Nat Tuner, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. The other black heroes helped build America by coal mining, farming and fighting for their country. The black hero or new black man is talented, powerful and challenges his adversaries. The black hero embodies democracy and wants a better tomorrow for America.

The fifth part "Larghetto" discusses that "None in the Land can say" the black man has contributed to any of the wrongdoings of the white man ("Dark Symphony," p. 41). The black man has not stuffed the ballot boxes, caused the stock market crash or cheat American citizens. The foundation of America is like the Sahara Desert with a Fascist undertone.

The sixth part "Tempo di Marcia" says the black man will advance no matter what. Blacks will advance in society despite a lower education, lies of the white man, poverty and Jim Crow laws. The black man will advance with the people of the world.

Dark Symphony Analysis

"Dark Symphony" is split into six section. Each section has an Italian name similar to a movement in a real symphony. This poem is song-like in its essence. The reader can almost sing it to her/himself. It is an uplifting song of the black plight in America and how the black men will advance, even though they face seemingly impossible challenges.

The poem embodies the spirit of resilience of the black man. There are many allusions made to famous blacks throughout history such as Crispus Attucks, Frederick Douglass

and Harriet Tubman. These are the people who have shaped America. They are the black heroes. But the common black laborers who helped build America are heroes as well. All of these people symbolize strength, hardship, and the power to overcome every obstacle. To forget the black hero is to forget history.

In the end, Tolson sends a powerful message to his readers that blacks will advance and continue to move up in society.



A Song for Myself Poems

A Song for Myself Poems Summary

In the poem "A Song for Myself," the narrator discusses the human soul. Those who are bad men cannot escape the afterlife. In death, there is truth. If the person is a bad person in life and has a bad soul, they will be condemned in the afterlife. The narrator hopes he has a good enough soul to have a good afterlife.

In "The Shift of Gears," a man goes to garage to fix his car. He asks the mechanic what is wrong. The mechanic replies he shifts the gears too aggressively, much like steering a horse.

In "The Ballad of the Rattlesnake," black and white sharecroppers sit together. One sharecropper tells the following tale of when he visited the American South. The Apache Indians tie up a blond-haired man and torture him. The Apache chief ties a rock to a rattlesnake's tail. It bites the frightened blond man and kills him. The bones of the snake and the man lie in the desert.

In "A Scholar Looks at an Oak," the oak tree sits erect through storms and natural atrophy. Though its limbs sag, it still grows and flourishes.

A Song for Myself Poems Analysis

"A Song for Myself" is written with very short lines of only one to two words per lines. Each line has a powerful word. The poem looks like a simple song, that is literally to be sung to oneself. It has a nursery rhyme quality. The narrator sings himself this poem and the words represent his thought process to decide if he's going to heaven or hell when he dies. In the last stanza, he says Selah, which is a word frequently used in the Hebrew Bible. The loose translation of Selah is to look and listen carefully. At the end, he wants the reader to think about her/his life and if her/his soul is ready for the kingdom of heaven as well.

In "The Shift of Gears" the man represents the white man. He is too aggressive and he drives his car like he's driving an old horse and buggy. Thus, the white man cannot use his old driving ways with an automobile. He must adapt to the new and progressive ways of the time. Tolson uses the man's driving as a metaphor to say the white man must adapt and include black Americans in their society.

In "The Ballad of the Rattlesnake" the tale is a metaphor for how the white man continually baits and tortures the black man. Even though, it is reverse in the tale, it is not right by any means. Now the snake and the man is dead, and the evil Apaches live on. The sharecroppers who listen to the tale are both black and white, thus each learns a lesson from the story. However, Tolson does not clarify if a white or black man tells the tale. In the end, it does not matter, because both races can learn a lesson about how to

treat a fellow human being. Therefore, the identity of the storyteller is purposely unknown.

In "A Scholar Looks at an Oak" the tree symbolizes the black man. Although he is beaten down through history and the white man, he still stands proud and resilient. Nothing can break him. In the end, he will keep growing and overcoming obstacles.



Sonnets

Sonnets Summary

In "A Primer for Today," a biologist says change occurs through environment and reproduction in the animal and plant kingdom. A geologist says change occurs through the earth's changes. A economist says change occurs in man through periods of wealth and poverty. The historian says he wants to know when these changes are too fast or too slow.

In "The Gallows," a teacher from long ago teaches his students about alchemy. He is a positive influence on his students, creating joy and freedom. But in the end, the townspeople hang him.

In "The Blindness of Scorn," a Malay or a racially mixed person of the Malay Peninsula guide meets up with Sahib, the white man, in the jungle. Dressed in a loincloth, the guide cries out for Sahib and then curses at him. He shoves the white man and a python falls. The Malay guide, trapped in the snake's coils, says the blindness of scorn, or hatred, puts one on the attack.

In "If You Should Lie to Me" the narrator warns his lover if she lies to him, he will be deeply hurt and all affection will be lost. Love equals trust and lies ruin that trust. He always wants her to tell the truth, no matter how ugly it is. A lie kills his reason for existing.

In "A Hamlet Rives Us," a man grieves over the loss of a dead loved one. A Hamlet, or murder, splits the narrator and the man. The narrator doesn't know how to console the man because he's lost someone too. He doesn't acknowledge his friend's grief and it makes his conscience feel better.

In "The Traitor to France," a traitor is the worst kind of deception. A traitor is a whore, a thief, and someone who disgraces the land. The traitor is a virgin until the narrator's deception led the traitor to defect to France.

In "A Legend of Versailles," Lloyd George, Woodrow Wilson and Clemenceau, the leaders of England, America and France, meet at Versailles to discuss ending the war. A Tiger is there too and he asks if they really want peace because it will mean giving up great power and allowing all men to be equal. They say no. The Tiger shouts they want war.

In "The Note," the narrator sees a woman who he is drawn to, but doesn't love in a store buying toys. She kills herself and leaves a suicide note saying she has nothing else to do in life. The narrator says pity is worse than scorn.



In "Inevitability," a great chief brings terror and many fear him. They kill him and feed on his body. When he was alive, they revered him out of fear. Now that he is dead, they eat him and his greatness.

In "The Braggart," a blond, Nordic man boasts of his magnificence and vanity. He says everything in this world answers to the highest rank and the Nordic people are the highest rank of people. A big game hunter says he has seen ants eat a lion as he roared.

In "The Big Game Hunter," Zulu hunters hunt in the bush. A lion charges them. The brave Zulu chief punches the lion in the mouth. He is not scared because he is brave. Sacrifices flourish while the conscience collects fear.

In "The Dictionary of the Wolf," Abe Lincoln says we all want freedom, but freedom has a different meaning for everyone. An ax man says a wolf kills a sheep. The sheep praises the shepherd for tyranny. The wolf excuses the shepherd of killing freedom. Lincoln replies the wolf's story exists, but will not last through time.

Sonnets Analysis

"A Primer for Today" is a metaphor for how different people from different professions view the changing world. Thus, the world changes differently through the eyes of different people. The historian raises a good point: when is change too fast or too slow? How can one tell? This is social commentary on if the world is ready for the black man to be equal in society. Should this change come fast or slow?

"The Gallows" is social commentary on the fear of change. A teacher comes into town, teaching both boys and girls new things and exciting them to learn. In the end, the change is too much for the town and the people hang him. This fear of change symbolizes the fear of change of blacks becoming equal to whites.

"The Blindness of Scorn" is a metaphor for how the white man is full of hatred, and this hatred puts the white man on the attack. The hate consumes the white man. Thus, the hatred for the black man consumes the white man and the white man's only way to deal with his emotions is to beat down the black man. In the end, hatred is useless and a wasted emotion because it causes the white man to always be in fear.

"If You Should Lie to Me" seems like Tolson writes directly to his lover. He alludes to Iago, the villain in Shakespeare's play Othello, who lies to Othello, resulting in the death of his wife. He also alludes to the *raison d'être*, which translates to the reason for existing. These two allusions show that the narrator's fear is deception by his lover, and if she deceives him, it will kill his spirit. Tolson may also be using this poem as a metaphor for relations between black and white Americans. Blacks only want to be told the truth. Lying hurts worse than torture.

In "A Hamlet Rives Us" the narrator represents the white man. A man who ignores the suffering of the grieving man, or the black man. The white man doesn't know how to



reach out and help him. He says his conscience is relieved when the friend or grieving man passes by. This is the conscience of the white man, who chooses to ignore the black man's suffering.

In "The Traitor to France," a whore is a metaphor for a traitor. One who rejects the homeland is the worst type of whore. An allusion is made to Mammon, which is a false god of wealth. Mammon lures the traitor. This poem is a metaphor for how the illusion of wealth causes the white man to become a traitor to America and the basic rights of America. The Constitution promises justice and liberty for everyone, yet the traitor turns his back on his homeland and does not uphold this right. The white man is the worst kind of traitor.

"A Legend of Versailles" alludes to the meeting of Versailles when Lloyd George (leader of England), Woodrow Wilson (president of the US) and Clemenceau (leader of France) discuss ending the war. Once they realize, every man, including the black man, will have equality and power, they realize they don't want peace. The Tiger symbolizes the absent black man in the room shouting the truth — that the leaders never ended for the black man to be equal.

"The Note" symbolizes the plight of the black man. He is unloved as well and feels there is nothing to do but die some days. In the end, to pity him is worse than to hate him. It is the pity from the white man that drives the black man to his death.

In "The Inevitability," the chief is a metaphor for any ruling power. In the end, the people respect him out of fear. And that fear will lead to the ruling power's death. The people who kill him and eat his body are fools because they act like animals and devour a tainted body. The ruling power for Tolson's time period is the white man. One day, he will meet his demise, just like the once great chief.

In "The Braggart," the Nordic or Scandinavian man is a symbol for the white man. He thinks he is the best and all other people are lesser. However, it is the wise big game hunter who says that the lesser animals or the ants ate the king of the animal kingdom or the lion. This is a metaphor for the black man overcoming the white man. It is inevitable.

"The Big Game Hunter" tells what a brave man should be. He should be willing to sacrifice his own life for the good of his brethren. As the poem says, bravery comes from the heart as the Latins believe. This symbolizes how all men should be brave and protect each other. They should act like the Zulu chief, fearless and with a heart full of love. Man should act out of love and protection for all men.

In "The Dictionary of the Wolf," Lincoln symbolizes the want of freedom. But the ax man tells the fable of the wolf, sheep and shepherd. The sheep praises the shepherd as the sheep dies, but the wolf blames the shepherd for killing freedom. But the wolf is a liar and cannot be trusted. The wolf represents the white man and his racist perspective. The white man can to his racist rhetoric, but over time, people will stop listening to him.



Of Men and Cities Poems

Of Men and Cities Poems Summary

In the first poem "Vesuvius," the volcano Vesuvius lies dormant. Nature and people go about their business regularly. The townspeople discuss if and when Vesuvius will erupt. The hillman says they should not build on Vesuvius because it will erupt someday soon. They wise men of the town don't believe him. Vesuvius erupts and floods over Pompeii. It cannot stop erupting and destroys Pompeii and everything around it.

In "The Shipwright," workers build a ship day and night. They work hard and are happy in their work. They are the citizens of the Earth who want to sail the seas in happiness.

In "The Triumph Aster," the narrator talks about how East and West meet in the sanctuary of a garden in the middle of his city. The Triumph aster or genus of Chinese plant grows. It dreams of a better world and is strong.

In "The Bard of Addis Ababa," a massive yellow dog rips apart other animals as he roams through Africa. The Bard is a dark, African man. He wears things from many different cultures. He chants of freedoms. He calls to the warriors to take the masters down. The people of the city of Addis Ababa await the Bard. The captain comes in and so does the massive yellow dog. The people ask the Bard to empower the heroes and he is happy.

In "Damascus Bride," a craftsman finishes making his blade. It has beautiful black and white veins. The sword is one of beauty and strength, fit for the sultan.

In "The Street Called Straight," people go about their daily business. A pale-faced man asks about a house. The townspeople grow interested in money because of the man. The narrator drinks in a tavern and ponders why the Straight Street is suddenly crooked.

In "Babylon" the ancient city exemplifies overindulgence and wealth. However, Babylon has slaves. Despite its vanity, Babylon's slavery overrides any of its beauty and magnificence. The city disgusts the narrator and he warns Babylon that slavery makes it a doomed city. It will implode eventually.

Of Men and Cities Poems Analysis

In "Vesuvius," the ancient Mount Vesuvius symbolizes the black man's rage. His anger and repression is a power keg waiting to blow. The white man does not believe that the black man will wreak havoc on their society, even though the hillman warns them. The ancient city of Pompeii and its people represent the ignorance of the white man. In this poem, the black man is victorious and he wipes out the white man. The white man learns not to repress the black or he will face dire consequences.



In "The Shipwright," the ship workers symbolize the dream of the black man: to work hard and be happy and free. The ship workers take pride in their work and so does the black man. The allusion of Galahad is a man who shows absolute devotion to ideals of the highest order. The black man is a Galahad, as are the ship workers. The allusion of Prometheus is the Titan who steals fire from Zeus and gives it to mankind. Zeus punishes him by chaining him to a rock and having an eagle eat his liver every day. Tolson alludes to this Greek mythological tale because Prometheus represents the oppression of the black man by the white man. The white man holds back the black man so he can't be free. In the end, the black man will prevail because he will find happiness by sailing on the ships he makes and becoming free.

"The Triumph Aster" is dedicated to Madame Chiang. She was a Chinese woman of great importance during Tolson's time. She was a famous political figure and writer. The Triumph Aster is a symbol for Madame Chiang. She is a strong woman that Tolson clearly admires. The aster, a symbol of Chiang, represents a better world where an Asian woman can succeed. She is the hope for all minorities everywhere, including the black man.

In "The Bard of Addis Ababa," the city of Addis Ababa is the capital of Ethiopia. The Bard symbolizes the inspiration for freedom for all African people. The yellow dog symbolizes the white man, who is the oppressor. The Bard inspires the black man to fight for his freedom against the white man. The Bard is a militant figure, who chooses to inspire by chanting about violence and an eye-for-an-eye methods. He is vengeful. The black man will fight as long as he has the inspiration and leadership.

In "The Damascus Bride," the blade is a symbol for the black and white man joining forces. The sword is beautiful and strong, as the mixture of black and white men would be. It is a sword for the sultan, a perfect mixture of beauty and strength fit for a great ruler. If the sultan goes to battle, he has the best of both worlds: the mixture of the black and white man. Tolson makes social commentary here saying that the black and white man are stronger when they are together as one.

In "The Street Called Straight," the pale-faced man is the white man who corrupts the happy and normal city of Damascus. The city people, most likely on an ancient system of trading, now grow interested in money. The white man infects the city with greed. The poem represents the early beginnings of the white man's influence over Middle-Eastern and African societies and how he changes their way of life for the worse. "The Street Called Straight" is no longer straight; it is a crooked, corrupted place due to the white man.

In "Babylon," the city of Babylon is a symbol for America. Like Babylon, America risks implosion if many of its inhabitants are not free. The narrator warns that America could self-destruct as well if they keep the black man and other minorities from their Constitutional right of freedom. The poem ends with a prediction of a society collapsing. This society could be America too.



The Idols of the Tribe

The Idols of the Tribe Summary

In the poem "The Idols of the Tribe," the African warriors in the field pray to the gods. They have a ceremony to sacrifice themselves to these gods. There is a black tribal god, who is a narcissist. The yellow god is vegetarian and snubs the carnivore white god. The Nordic god is beautiful, white and supreme. There is bias in the tribe. It is the fool who worships all these gods based on race.

Southern American towns keep the black man down. Hate is infectious. There is a Fuhrer, or Hitler-figure, in every society. A road meets at five points of different races. The idols of the tribe endure and the less people grow to hate them. Justice prevails. It is better to go forward than go back to racism and hatred. Mein Kamp, Hitler's racist doctrine, is poisonous. The people who worship these false idols shall be eventually judged in the eyes of God.

The Idols of the Tribe Analysis

In the poem "The Idols of the Tribe," before the poem begins, there is a quote from Mein Kamp. Mein Kamp, or My Struggle, is Hitler's autobiography and political ideological book. The selected quote says that a state who does not mix races and upholds the purest race will rule the world. Tolson begins with this quote because it sets the tone for the poem. Hitler is an example of the false idol Tolson discusses throughout the poem. The fools are those who worship and follow the false idol's words.

The poem serves a foreshadow for America as the narrator warns the reader of what happens when you worship a false god. The god may be black, white or yellow. It does not matter the color of his skin. Any false god is bad.

Tolson uses the African plains setting as a microcosm for the world. There are all types of false gods all over the world. They come from the Nordic North or African South. World War II directly influences Tolson as demonstrated in this poem. There is an underlying of fear and a warning to make this racism stop. If it does not, it will spread to America, the land of the free. This is Tolson's fear.

Tolson alludes to Gomorrah in the last stanza of the poem. Sodom and Gomorrah were the two cities destroyed by God's wrath for their people's sins, according to the Bible. Tolson warns that God will destroy any society who worships false gods, thus the society will receive the same fate as Gomorrah.



Tapestries of Time

Tapestries of Time Summary

In the poem "Tapestries of Time," time moves on despite racism and freedoms being denied to all. Major tyrants of the world, such as Caesar, Alexander and Napoleon ravage through time. There is a Golden Age with Christ, but man continually sins. White tyrants rule and fools follow them. The common people all over the world do not dream of luxuries and wealth. They go about their daily activities. A tyrant is the worst of his kind: a fool and a little man.

The narrator sees death, but he will never see the death of freedom. Societies fight with one another and tyrants may rule, yet justice will prevail in the end. The march of global man continues on throughout time.

Tapestries of Time Analysis

In the poem "Tapestries of Time," the narrator foreshadows a world that will not give into tyranny. The message of this poem is though tyranny is strong, freedom will always prevail. Again, World War II strongly influences Tolson as he uses the swastika to symbolize hate and prejudice in the last stanza. Tolson provides social commentary on how societies should never bow to tyrants, such as the Nazis. The Nazis can also be a symbol for the tyrannical white man of America. Anyone who keeps the black man down and does not give him his rightful freedoms is a tyrant. The tapestries tell a story of man through time. In these stories, tyrants continually play the main role. Tolson wants the tyrants out the story and out of history and to let freedom prevail as time moves in his day and age.



Fugitive Poems

Fugitive Poems Summary

In the poem "African China," Wu Shang, a Chinese man, has a shop in Harlem. A gorgeous, Amazonian-like black woman comes into the shop. Wu Shang is very attracted to her. Big John, a black gigolo, warns Wu Shang of his attraction, but Wu Shang says it's fine. Dixie Dixon, the woman, breaks her leg and Wu Shang helps her home. They fall in love and have a child, a boy named Wu Shang, Junior. He is half African, half Chinese. The kids tease him and call him African China.

"A Long Head to a Round Head" starts in the wilderness with a camel, ocelot and peacocks. All can change and adapt to their environment somehow. The narrator names tyrants such as Caesar and Charles the Great. A tyrant is dangerous for the people, since he changes and adapts to his environment like the animals of the wilderness.

"The Man from Halicarnassus" is a poem of Greek history. Halicarnassus is the beautiful, ancient Greek city where Alexander the Great fought the Persians. Clio is the muse of history in Greek mythology. In the poem, the narrator says for Clio's sake, all history must be remembered, both good and bad. A black man stretches his hand toward Athens, but race is geography. In the end, the poet can control history if he wants.

The poem "E.&O.E." stands for errors and omissions excepted. The poem discusses how two men can have two ways of life: primitive and sophisticated. The idea comes from Lorca's quote before the poem begins. The narrator tries to establish an identity for himself. He doesn't identify with certain people. He knocks on doors to try to find out his identity. He finds his identity by discovering what he is not i.e. he is not someone who seeks the Holy Grail. Nor is he a Jew next to the Wailing Wall. As the poem ends, he does not have an identity.

In "Abraham Lincoln of Rock Springs Farm," the poem starts on Lincoln's childhood farm. His family is there: Aunt Peggy, grandma, mother (Nancy) and father (Tom). Aunt Peggy senses a baby is on the way. Nancy is pregnant. Tom says no one, even a baby, has human nature. Nancy has her baby, Abraham Lincoln, and Tom is proud. Aunt Peggy is happy too. Abraham is born on the Sabbath, a Sunday, and he has long legs and ax man's hands. Nancy says Abraham is the dream of both her family's and Tom's family and that Abraham will be a trailblazer.

Fugitive Poems Analysis

In "African China," the relationship between Wu Shang and Dixie is a symbol for an attempt at a mixed race marriage. The attempt is noble, since they see each other for who they are: mere people. Yet the world sees them as a strange coupling. The schoolchildren tease Wu Shang, Junior, which shows the marriage is controversial. The



children still suffer from their parents' choices. The mixing of Africa and China foreshadows how America strives to be: a melting pot of races. Tolson foreshadows that the only way the mixing will be accepted is if people have mixed race children. Reproducing is a step to freedom for the black man.

In "A Long Head to a Round Head," Tolson has two lines in boldface. The first is "whatever is, is" and the second is "Odi profanum vulgus et arceo" (Fugitive Poems, "A Long Head to a Round Head," pg. 130.) The "whatever line" foreshadows that tyrants will always rule, and always be able to rule because of their ability to adapt. The second line is Latin and it loosely translates to, "I hate the ignorant and unholy people and I keep them at a distance." This line provides the inner thoughts of the narrator, and thus, his most important thought. This line can also be seen as a warning to others: to keep far away from those deny freedom and justice.

"The Man from Halicarnassus" is one of Tolson's most complex and obscure poems. The reader gains insights into interpretation because Tolson mentions a quote from H.G. Wells before the poem starts. The quote says the poet of Herodotus, the Greek historian who is the Father of History, controls the historian. In this poem, we see the poet, Tolson, trying to control history and change history when saying a black man can be in Athens. But historians would disagree. History is history. Geography is geography. But the poet has the ability to alter history and show all sides of it, both good and bad. In the poem, the narrator may be unreliable because he may alter history, but in the end, he is in control of the reader.

"E.&O.E." is an extremely obscure and complex poem by Tolson. It is so complex that many poetry experts have not attempted to interpret it. The overall interpretation is the narrator is on a journey to discover who he's not. He is not only primitive or sophisticated, as the Lorca quote alludes to. The key line in this poem when the narrator says "I am what I am not" (Fugitive Poems, "E.&O.E." pg. 135.) His journey is one of self-discovery. All of the complex allusions in the poem to ancient Greek mythology and Egyptian history, etc. tell the reader what he is not. In the end, the narrator is not all these things or people. However, he has not mentioned any black men or societies. Therefore, he is a black man.

In "Abraham Lincoln of Rock Spring Farm," Tolson delves into the history of Lincoln's birth. He creates anticipation in the family, and upon the birth, the family could not be happier. Historically, Lincoln frees the slaves and he is a reverential figure to the black man. His Sabbath birth symbolizes a Christ-like figure is born. Baby Lincoln represents the best of both worlds: he is a child built for the farm with long legs and big hands, but he is also a child destined for great things. The baby has human nature as his father Tom refers to. This human nature will bring about change in society as Lincoln is one of history's greatest and most influential leaders in American history. The birth of Lincoln symbolizes eventual freedom for the black man.



Libretto for the Republic of Liberia

Libretto for the Republic of Liberia Summary

In the epic poem "Libretto for the Republic of Liberia," the part names are the basic musical scales. The parts are the musical scales of Do Re Mi Fa Sol La Ti Do. The poem is dedicated to the African nation of Liberia, a republic composed of former African American slaves and slaves freed from slave ships. Tolson puts a question mark after the word Liberia seven times in the beginning of the poem. He asks the question Liberia and then answers his answer questions. Liberia is a nation of survival for the black man.

The narrator says to Liberia, "You are / Black Lazarus risen from the White Man's grave" ("Libretto for the Republic of Liberia," pg. 160.) The people of Liberia have risen again, just like the Bible's Lazarus, and survive. Liberia represents the new Africa, one of a mixture of people. Even those in Timbuktu, a city in Mali and historical and spiritual Islam center in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, say that Europe is empty culturally compared to Liberia. For black Americans, Liberia is the gateway to the Eastern world.

Africa cannot be brought down. The more the white man tries to bring it down, it will bounce back. In the end, God will save the soul of the black man, but He cannot control the white man's actions against the black man. America is the narrator's mother. Liberia is his wife. Africa is his brother. The narrator denounces racism and uplifts the black man through an extremely complex mixture of languages and allusions. For example, he says even racist institutions like the White House and the Kremlin cannot keep the black man down. After each denouncement, he says Selah, which is the Hebrew and loosely translates to look and listen carefully.

The complexity continues for the last part of Do. The narrator rambles into a incomprehensible set of obscure allusions and words from various languages. He refers to Futurafrique, which is play on words for FrancAfrique, or the relationship between France and Africa. He then refers to the United Nations, the Bula Matadi, Le Premier des Noirs of Pan-African Airways, and The Parliament of the African Peoples. Tolson seems to praise all these references for their dedication to the African people, but praises The Parliament of the African Peoples in particular. It brings joy to mankind as the races mix and brings hope for a better world for the black man.

Libretto for the Republic of Liberia Analysis

Tolson continues his extremely complex and nearly indiscernible poetry in "Libretto for the Republic of Liberia." The parts broken into the musical scale symbolizes the African song and the need to sing Liberia's praises. It is an uplifting poem, one that sings of the hope of the African nation. It is a nation composed of former slaves, thus Liberia represents the ultimate freedom for the black man.



The citizens of Liberia escape their white oppressors. They are a symbol of hope, peace and happiness for the entire world. Liberia is the narrator's wife. Liberia as the wife figure is a metaphor for Liberia as a romantic seductress. Its beauty and inherent qualities seduce the narrator and he lusts for what he sees. The relationship continues to one of the wife, who is a supporter, a partner in life and a trusting soul. In comparison, America is his mother. This is a metaphor for America being a teacher, disciplinarian and elder. America is the one in power. Both the wife "Liberia" and the mother "America" have their respective roles.

In the end, the narrator sings the praises of all the institutions he believes uplift the black man. Liberia is an inspiration to all and he sees hope for the black man and the mixing of all races in Liberia and in Africa in general.



Harlem Gallery, Alpha to Mu

Harlem Gallery, Alpha to Mu Summary

"Harlem Gallery, Book I, The Curator" is the first book of poems in this series. However, Tolson died before he completed any of the other intended books. Thus, this is the only book in the series.

"Harlem Gallery" has multiple parts. Each part has its own designated letter of the Greek alphabet.

In Alpha, the first part of "Harlem Gallery," the narrator introduces the reader to the gallery itself. The reader sees all types of paintings; for example, of Africa and Asia. The narrator sets up the reader to take a journey with him through the Gallery.

In Beta, the art is on the walls. The narrator describes art and how he feels about it. One can explore art with the eye and the tongue. The narrator feels he plays a minor part in providing art to the people of Harlem. He shall never be censured because his art is free. The reader discovers the narrator is The Curator of the Gallery. He is an ex-professor of art. He feels that the "ex" stands for a person he once was, not the person he is now. In his days as a professor, he was not a gifted lecturer, but he can provide art.

In Gamma, art is city. It has gates and roads and cars that race around. The people of art are the actor of the theater, not an actual theater, but the theater of life. The reader learns The Curator is of mixed raced as he alludes to his Afroirishjewish grandfather. The grandfather left Harlem eventually. Art is a mosaic of colors to The Curator. He loves all the colors and patterns: the blue, silver, red, ivory and brown.

In Delta, the viewer of art should never doubt the artist and his craft. The critics lose sight of what art really is. They profit off of criticizing art, but they do not understand what the artist tries to say through his painting. The artist endures, no matter how criticized he is. The existence of being for an artist is a mere question mark. Art is not easily made and is not supposed to be easily deciphered or analyzed. Obscurity is the artist's friend.

In Epsilon, the Gallery celebrates great artists by putting their work on its walls. From the delicate leaf to Dutch canals, the Gallery celebrates and holds many different kinds of art. The artist does not need affirmation. Many times, a nod of approval is the worst thing for an artist. Art is fundamental and supports society like the backbone of whale.

In Zeta, there is a half-blind painter who lives in a dingy Harlem flat and says a Yiddish proverb. He smokes tobacco and complains to The Curator that no one loves him. The Curator examines his Black Bourgeoisie painting and discover synthesis seen by the great artists like Daumier, Gropper, and Picasso. The artist's name is John Laugart. He says to The Curator that a true work of art is everlasting whether it is liked or disliked,



and no matter where it is and who is looking at it. Laugart is robbed and murdered in his flat — the narrator tells the reader this in a postscript. But the Black Bourgeoisie painting lives on in the Gallery.

In Eta, The Curator goes to Aunt Grindle's shop. He meets Doctor Obi Nkomo, who is the alter ego of the Harlem Gallery. He is not easily impressed by art. The Curator also meets Mr. Guy Delaporte III who questions him. The Doctor and The Curator leave the shop to walk and philosophize. The Doctor tells an old Zulu folktale about a hunter, eagle and chicken. The eagle does not know who he is.

In Theta, The Curator says that art sometimes doesn't love the wall sits on.

In Iota, Doctor Nkomo and The Curator are back in the Gallery. The Curator introduces the Doctor to the Gallery and shows him around. The East Wing is colorful. The West Wing is exciting and surprising. The North Wing is full of portraits of the black man. It represents all the black men in Harlem. The South Wing is a cacophony of colors.

In Kappa, Mr. and Mrs. Guy Delaporte III are Harlem's elite and they visit the Gallery. He is president of a company. He is the Sugar Hill elite. He stops before John Laugart's painting Black Bourgeoisie. The Doctor criticizes the painting harshly and The Curator responds it is representative of Harlem. But the Doctor isn't impressed. But The Curator remember John Laugart is talented.

In Lambda, the third artist of the poem, Hideho Heights comes into the Gallery. He is a jazz musician who plays at a Harlem club. Hideho tells a story about how great Louis Armstrong, nicknamed Satchmo, is. Satchmo is one of the black greats, like John Henry, according to Hideho. He then asks, "Are you hip to this, Harlem? Are you hip?" ("Harlem Gallery," Lambda, pg. 260.) Satchmo is the greatest trumpeter the Universe has ever seen, announces Hideho.

In Mu, Hideho and The Curator go to the Zulu Club. The club has African figures on its walls and is full of deluded customers who dream of Park Avenue riches. A woman approaches them and she is a whore. The Curator daydreams of sex. Hideho says the black suffers from nothingness and that jazz is a relaxing drug or marijuana to the black man. The Curator says jazz is philosophy for the white man. Hideho catches The Curator daydreaming and says it is dangerous for the white man when the black man thinks.

Harlem Gallery, Alpha to Mu Analysis

Following the theme of Greek mythology and Greek literature in his poems, Tolson uses the Greek alphabet. He may choose to use this structure as a sign of intellect to his white readers. Unfortunately, the plan backfired because he was rejected by white readers for being too black, and rejected by black readers for being too high brow and white.



The Harlem Gallery is made up of paintings. Each Greek letter part is painting in which the reader views and interprets. The reader can see anything s/he wants in the paintings. As long as s/he takes away something valuable from the experience, they've walked through the Harlem Gallery appropriately. Throughout the Gallery, the reader also sees obscure allusions to ancient mythology and Biblical terms. These portraits create a theme of interpretation. As a reader, you are free to interpret the art on the walls any way you please.

The Curator is the narrator and the guide of the poem. He admits his shortcomings, being a former professor, not a current professor. He knows he was not a good professor, either. However, in the Harlem Gallery, he provides art to the masses i.e. the black man, and that is the most important job of all. The Curator is a metaphor for one who provides for the black man.

Obscurity is celebrated in the Gallery. As with Tolson's entire book, obscurity is an ongoing theme. Obscurity is a metaphor for how the black man wants to be viewed in society. He is not a simple being. Instead, he is complex and his obscurity makes him a complex human being, just like the white man.

John Laugart is a metaphor for the common black man. He lives in the ghetto, but doesn't harm anyone and lives a peaceful life. Yet he is murdered. The reader only knows of his death due to a mere postscript. This represents how the white man views the black's man life — as a tiny side note or nothing of importance. Laugart's painting the Black Bourgeoisie is so important because he contributes to society. A black man leaves his mark on the world for all to judge and criticize. This painting represents how black society views itself. Some may criticize harshly while others will love what they see. The fact that Laugart is half-blind only contributes to the importance of the painting. He paints the half-truth and the commentary by the people in the poem fill in the rest of the truth.

Doctor Nkomo is not impressed by art. He insults the Gallery. Thus, he represents the outsider who refuse to understand art or the black culture. He stands as an outsider, even in the Gallery, and hurts The Curator's feelings as he insults the Black Bourgeoisie painting. But the Doctor doesn't care. He has his opinion and wants it to be known.

Guy Delaporte III and his wife represent the elite of black society. They live on Sugar Hill, the famous elite section in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance.

Hideho Height represents the fun of black society. He loves his jazz and to tell everyone about it. Satchmo is his god. As silly as Hideho seems, he is also very smart. He tells The Curator that his thinking is dangerous to the white man. Hideho is a character who may blossom as the poem continues. The reader may discover Hideho is the smartest black man of all.



Harlem Gallery, Nu to Omega

Harlem Gallery, Nu to Omega Summary

In Nu, Rufino Lauglin, the M.C. of the night, gets on the microphone at the Zulu Club. He announces Hideho Heights, as a distinguished guest and the poet laureate of Lenox Avenue in Harlem. The crowd explodes into applause for Hideho. The Curator thinks about how silly the M.C. is. Lena a drunk woman comes over and throws herself at Hideho saying if he makes her a poem, he can sleep with her. He makes up a silly, little rhyme and she giggles.

In Xi, Hideho gets up on the stage. The crowd immediately quiets and he has everyone's attention. The Curator thinks Hideho is bit of a fake. Hideho continues his poem. He talks about John Henry and the night he was born. Wise Men come to Henry's cabin and cry out about the birth of great John Henry. The night John Henry is born, there is a thunderstorm and the animals cheer, according to Hideho. A man named Wafer Waite jumps to his feet and interrupt the John Henry poem and ask if Henry's mother and father weren't warned. Hideho replies that baby Henry tells him mom and dad to feed him barley immediately to garner strength. The crowd cheers. Henry asks for more regular food and when he asks for water, Old Man River runs and hides. Despite disputes over where was born, Henry writes on the Big Bend Tunnel, he was born in Louisiana. The crowd goes crazy again. The Curator sees Hideho's gift for poetry. The Curator's black crony, Vincent Aveline, stops by his table to say what a great night it is. As Hideho finished his poem in the background. Joshua Nitze, a former professor of philosophy, recites his poem, but it's not nearly as good. Vincent Aveline says Guy Delaporte III slept with his wife. Black Diamond stops by the table as well. He is the heir to the Lenox Policy Racket. He has a huge ego and he is a big drinker. The Curator taught Black Diamond his first art lesson on Picasso. He insults the Harlem Gallery and exclaims he will be angry if the Gallery owners fire The Curator. He hate the white man who insult good black men. Doctor Nkomo later says the story of the python and the frog. Hideho ends this part saying that the black man doesn't know what they are doing.

In Omicron, Doctor Nkomo continues to life and art are linked. Artistic instinct rules the artist. Time is past. Art stands by itself. When the rich man criticizes art, it is only a vice. It is not real, artistic criticism. Criticism consoles the wealthy, but actually leaves them poorer. The profit for the artist is the creation of the art. The pride of the artist is the beauty of the work. The passion of the artist is nature and the environment. The school of the artist is animals and the land. The grind of the artist lie in the golden eagle. The temperament of the artist is movement. The sensibility of the artist is the test of new forms. The sense of beauty of the artist is heart and the brain.

In Pi, a work of art is a place. The place belongs to a race, a time and a psyche. Light and shadow, idiom and tone and symbols and myth bring happiness to those who love and appreciate art. When art is not limited, it can soar to the highest mountain peak.



Doctor Nkomo says in his speech to the artists of the Market Place Gallery in Harlem to remember the artists who came before them. To be a genius in art, you must work hard. A critic can be both right and wrong. The Curator says he appreciates when he visits a work of art, no matter where it is.

In Rho, it is New Year's Day. Hedda Starks calls The Curator. She's both crying and laughing. She's calling from the Harlem police station and tells The Curator she wants the desk clerk to leave her alone. The Sergeant says he hopes that he is not in Harlem on Judgment Day. Mister Starks had a black mother who gave him the first name of Mister. She could name him anything she pleased. Mister Starks is a conductor. Hedda Starks is in trouble because she slept with Guy Delaporte III.

In Sigma, the location is now a funeral home. The funeral home receives Mister Starks' will. He is buried in the tuxedo, what he wore as a composer in the Harlem Symphony Orchestra. Hedda Starks is advised to turn over to The Curator the Harlem Vignettes. The owner of the funeral home warned Mister Starks that black people shouldn't commit suicide. Mister Starks has a bullet in his heart. The gun is hidden in Crazy Cain's toilet bowl. Hedda Starks sits in jail accused of her husband's murder.

In Tau, the Harlem Vignettes begin. The Harlem Vignettes serve as small stories about various characters. The Curator remembers that Mister Sparks published a volume of poetry in his youth.

In Upsilon, there is a self-portrait of Mister Sparks. Mister Sparks is the first-person narrator of the Harlem Vignettes in this section. He says his talent is being an uptown whore and a downtown pimp. He is not black nor from Harlem nor is he an artist. He remembers the jazz music at the Gaya Bar. The Harlem Symphony Orchestra never sung Mister Sparks' praises. Even so, he doesn't deserve a pauper's grave. Hideho Heights is also at the right place and at the right time. He is both an artist and Harlem hipster. He is tragic but comedic at the same time. To the black bourgeoisie, Hideho is a crab roaming around in African America pubic hair. Dr. Igor Shears is a patron of the arts and travels to the Florida Keys with Mister Sparks, who is mystified by him. Ma'am Shears is simply a cliché of a person. Mister Sparks fires Crazy Cain from the Harlem Symphony Orchestra, despite Mrs. Guy Delaporte III's crying. Crazy Cain is the illegitimate son of Mr. Guy Delaporte III and Mister Sparks' wife, Black Orchid. Doctor Nkomo has the psyche of a mulatto. He is a scholar gypsy who loves luxurious things. Dr. Shears tells him he loves material things, and Nkomo replies he's not the first. Hideho says Nkomo wants to make wealth out of nothing. The Curator is a strange bird in Harlem. The Curator has a hard time getting the Gallery press, but every Guy Delaporte III farts, the newspaper reports on it. The Curator and Doctor Nkomo are very much alike. They both drink milk, but The Curator drinks cream while the Doctor drinks homogenized milk. The white of The Curator's cream floats atop, and the Doctor thinks he makes a bad decision to drink it. They argue over which milk is better. Mrs. Guy Delaporte III has a horrible temper. John Laugart does not give up as an artist, despite his blindness. Big Mama hardly has a conscience. She is very fat. In the speakeasy, men speak about how white skin equal success. Big Mama's face looks like a snake.



Mister Sparks is offered a job as pianist. He plays Rhapsody in Black and White, and then drinks a whole bottle of liquor. A man is juice, either sweet, hard or bitter in nature.

In Phi, The Curator talks about the Harlem Vignettes as Mister Sparks' volume of poetry. The Curator sees Harlem deteriorate. The Harlem Vignettes is the height of Harlem for him. The Curator asks what is a black man? Doctor Nkomo answers the black man is a mixture of men, but also a dog trapped like a former sewer rat. Hideho Heights say the black man inspires. Hideho tells the folktale of the shark swallowing the sea turtle whole, but the sea turtle gnaws his way out of the shark. No one can agree on who is the black man. In the end, the artist's baby is his poetry.

In Chi, one of the most important stanzas of the poem is in this section. It reads: "Poor Boy Blue, / the Great White World / and the Black Bourgeoisie / have shoved the Negro artist into / the white and not-white dichotomy, / the Afroamerican dilemma in the Arts— / the dialectic of / to be or not to be / a Negro" ("Harlem Gallery, Chi, p. 336). E.&O.E. is mentioned, one of Tolson's aforementioned poems. The artist's identity is split by race and class. No man can escape this. The success of poetry depends on timing, not just rhyme and sound.

In Psi, the majority of this section is addressed to Black Boy. It says, Black Boy you should be a black artist. It is god-like and he is a giant in the black community. You should face the racists and question who is the black man. You can use alcohol, wine specifically, to open your artistic mind. But beware of wine labels, since they are corrupted by the white man. Then the section is addressed to White Boy. It asks who is a white man, and who is a black man? A black man is white too. You shouldn't believe the myths of your white scholars. You don't even know grammar that well, but you are smarter than the black man. What do you hear when you hear the word Negro defined? You probably hear the racist stereotypes. The black man is merely a side dish in the white man's kitchen — an unsavory one. But the dish is a mix of foods.

In Omega, White Boy and Black Boy are addressed together. The difference between the two is merely education. The White Boy may be smarter, but lacks street knowledge and common sense. Both races lead to ignorance, and the lesser race is often ignored. Freedom is air, or oxygen, of the studio gallery. The black man's identity is simply groovy. The Harlem Gallery churns like a machine. The Curator leads it. What if the Harlem Gallery becomes a cause for celebration? It will be a deluge of people wanting to celebrate. The poem ends saying the Harlem Gallery chronicles the black man's journey to freedom.

Harlem Gallery, Nu to Omega Analysis

By the end of the poem, the reader realizes the historical context of the Harlem Gallery. It is a reference to the peanut gallery. In the days of segregation, the peanut gallery is where blacks sat in a movie theater. The peanut gallery was the cheaper seats in the balcony set aside for blacks. Thus The Curator's Harlem Gallery is symbol for the lower-class peanut gallery of the time. In an actual peanut gallery, from their seats, the viewer



watches the moving images on a movie screen. In comparison, the reader views the "paintings" of the Gallery through the Greek lettered sections.

An allusion that comes up a few times in Nu to Omega is Banquo's Ghost. Characters say they will not return like Banquo's Ghost. Banquo is a character in Shakespeare's Macbeth. Macbeth murders him because he doesn't trust him. Banquo returns as a ghost, startling Macbeth. This allusion symbolizes the characters of the Harlem Gallery because they will not return to a place that is unjust. In other words, they will not return to the world of the white man once they leave this earth.

When Hideho Heights gets up on stage, he represents the entertaining black man. However, he entertains for a black crowd, so that is fine. Hideho comes off as silly and ditzzy at first, especially in the first part of this poem. Even The Curator thinks his talent is false. But then The Curator and the reader listen to what Hideho says in his poetry. He makes astute, cultural observations about black society. He represents a kind of leader in Harlem. He inspires the people with his story of John Henry, and it almost sounds like he is a black preacher. Hideho Heights is the black man who brings truth to the black man. He also represents the stereotype of what whites think of blacks. At first, he seems foolish and nonsensical, but once you get to know him, he's actually quite talented and smart.

Doctor Nkomo straddles between wanting to be elite, yet understand the black bourgeoisie plight. He understands the artist well, though he is not one himself. The Doctor represents the struggle of the black man internally. He wants more for himself, especially in regard to material things, but he still loves to be surrounded by his people and his people's art.

The Harlem Vignettes serves a little stories and insights into the characters of the poem. Timing of the vignettes is very important. Mister Sparks only receives recognition for his artistry of poetry after he is dead, and after dedicating years of his life to the symphony. Mister Sparks' life is a metaphor for the life of the black artist. He will accomplish much in life, but never live to see recognition. The same thing happens to John Laugart, the half-blind artist. His painting Black Bourgeoisie only receive acclaim after he is murdered. Recognition and accolades for his art will only come after death.

The cream that The Curator and the Doctor argue over represents how the white man is on top. The Doctor is annoyed because The Curator chooses the cream, where the white fat sits atop i.e. the white man is on top. The Curator however just likes the milk. However, the Doctor drinks homogenized milk, so he still drinks some form of white. This symbolizes the black man unknowingly puts the white man on top.

For The Curator, the Harlem Vignettes is when Harlem was in its heyday. It is a memory long gone. However, the message of the Vignettes still lives on. What is a black man? To answer the question, Hideho Height uses the folktale of the shark and the sea turtle. This is a direct allusion to African and African American storytelling, since both use animals to teach a lesson. The sea turtle gnaws his way out the shark's belly as the



black man claws his way out of white power. Again, it is Hideho who provides the wisest answer.

In Chi, that important stanza is direct commentary on Tolson's real life. His poetry was not accepted by blacks or whites in his lifetime. The stanza is not only a reflection on Tolson as an artist, but on the Harlem Gallery itself. Who accepts the Gallery? Whites don't visit it, but blacks criticize it. The Gallery is located in Harlem, which is surrounded by the wealth of white Manhattan. Where does this Gallery belong?

As the poem ends, the narrator addresses both White Boy and Black Boy. He gives them specific instructions on how to act and what to think. In the end, the Harlem Gallery provides an outlet for the black man's freedom. As the reader leaves the Gallery, s/he leaves with moral lessons of how to treat white and black brethren. The Harlem Gallery is a symbol for freedom for the black man. Blacks should feel comfortable here and feel comfortable to browse the paintings and criticize. It is a place to meet friends and have artistic discussions. The Harlem Gallery provides an outlet for blacks, and any place a black man can express himself freely is where the black man is free.



Characters

The Curator appears in Harlem Gallery, pp. 209-363

The Curator is the main character of the Harlem Gallery in the poem "Harlem Gallery." He is the leader of the Gallery, who proudly displays the paintings of black artists on the wall. He also uses the Gallery as a place for the Harlem community to congregate and discuss poetry and art. Many times, he leads these discussions and he raises important points such as the who is the black man in society and what is art.

The Curator leads the other characters on a journey through the Gallery as they look and criticize the paintings. His job is not only of a guide, but also as someone who gives recognition to black artists. Without the Harlem Gallery, there would no recognition given to black painters, and without The Curator, the black man would not receive recognition in general.

The Curator is of mixed race. He is black, Jewish and Irish. He was once a professor of art, but not a good one. He feels his former job defines him, not the person he is today. He is what he once was. The Curator loves art and has a strong passion for it. As the main narrator of the Harlem Gallery, he shows the reader around the Gallery and acts as a "professor" to the reader, his student, teaching the student about art and black identity. In essence, his job is very important because he does the best thing possible: he provide the art of black artists and the freedom to enjoy it.

Hideho Heights appears in Harlem Gallery, pp. 209-363

Hideho Heights is the poet laureate of Harlem. He comes across as loud, silly and foolish. He loves his jazz, his Satchmo (or Louis Armstrong), and even likens jazz to marijuana for the black man. The black people of Harlem worship and love him and his poetry. They gather at the Zulu Club to hear Hideho recite his poetry, to which he receives thunderous applause. Shockingly, out of the mouth of ridiculous Hideho, comes the wise words of a preacher.

Hideho is a wise man and preacher-like throughout the poem. At first, before the reader knows him, he comes across as silly and flamboyant. But he is wise in his words. He uses poetry and animal folklore to teach lessons to those around him. He inspires the black people in Harlem with his words — much like a modern-day black preacher.

Hideho is also a common figure in the clubs of Harlem. He doesn't just move through the Harlem Gallery. Instead, he spends most of his time reciting poetry in clubs, especially the Zulu Club. He is an orator of the people. Hideho's appearance in the Zulu Club is important because provides the reader with a visceral experience of what a Harlem Renaissance club was like, and a glimpse into the fast-paced world of poetry slam and jazz of that time period.



Doctor Obi Nkomo appears in Harlem Gallery, pp. 209-363

Doctor Obi Nkomo is The Curator's good friend. He is also black and likes to philosophize with The Curator. The Doctor's problem is he wants for material things. He cannot stop this want, but also doesn't see anything wrong with it. He's no worse than anyone else. Because of his want, the doctor is not easily impressed, especially by the art in his friend's Gallery.

He is critical of art and people. He criticizes the Black Bourgeoisie painting, despite the fact it hurts The Curator's feelings. He is a very vocal person and judgmental, and that poses a problem for him. For example, he tells The Curator not to drink cream because the white fat floats atop. He gives his friend a stern lecture. Yet, the Doctor drinks homogenized milk, and doesn't see anything wrong with his milk decision.

In the later part of the poem, the Doctor makes some wise statements about art, which gives him depth. He says life and art are linked. He gives a speech to the Market Place Gallery in Harlem, and tells his listeners to remember the artists who come before them. The Doctor also tells the animal folklore story of the python and the frog. He is no longer superficial or critical. He turns into a man who appreciates the art of the Harlem Gallery.

John Laugart appears in Harlem Gallery, pp. 209-363

John Laugart is half-blind painter who paints the Black Bourgeoisie. The Curator selects it for the Harlem Gallery. John Laugart is a sad, lonely figure who dies talented, yet unloved. He is robbed and murdered. John Laugart finally receives recognition for Black Bourgeoisie after his death.

Mr. Guy Delaporte III appears in Harlem Gallery, pp. 209-363

Mr. Guy Delaporte III is the black elite. He is the president of a company and lives on Sugar Hill, the elite section of Harlem in the Harlem Renaissance. He loves art, but doesn't understand it.

Mister Sparks appears in Harlem Gallery, pp. 209-363

Mister Sparks writes the Harlem Vignettes. It is a sub-poem within the Harlem Gallery that tells little stories of its characters. Mister Sparks is the narrator in the Harlem Vignettes. He is a conductor with the Harlem Symphony Orchestra, but never receives praise for his work. He dies and finally receives praise for his poetry, the Harlem Vignettes, after his death.



The Mountain Climber appears in The Mountain Climber, p. 15

The Mountain Climber risks his life, despite warnings and weather, to climb the mountain.

The bartender appears in An Ex-Judge at the Bar, pp. 19-20

The bartender judges a black customer for killing another black man in war. He serves as the judge.

The Poet appears in The Poet, pp. 28-29

The poet is humble and above praise and vanity. He writes about the human soul and is the champion of the people.

Wu Shang appears in African China, pp. 125-128

Wu Shang is a Chinese man who lives in Harlem. He falls in love with a black woman named Dixie Dixon. They have a mixed race child and schoolkids taunt him by calling him African China.

Dixie Dixon appears in African China, pp. 125-128

Dixie Dixon is a gorgeous, Amazonian-like black woman whom Wu Shang, a Chinese man, falls in love with and marries. They have a mixed race child, who is called African China by schoolchildren.

Abraham Lincoln appears in Abraham Lincoln of Rock Spring Farm, pp. 150-155

Abraham Lincoln is a baby born to Tom and Nancy. He has ax man hands and long legs. He is the pride of Tom and is destined for great things.



Objects/Places

Rosetta Stone appears in Rendezvous with America, p. 6

The Rosetta Stone is an ancient, granite stone with hieroglyphic inscriptions. It is instrumental in aiding historians to understand and decipher ancient, Egyptian hieroglyphics.

nepenthe appears in Rendezvous with America, p. 9

In Greek mythology and literature, nepenthe is an anti-depressant drug or medicine to alleviate sorrow.

Rubicon appears in The Mountain Climber, p. 15

Rubicon is a river that runs through Italy. To "cross the Rubicon" is a sign for the act of war. It is an idiom for going past the point of no return, as Julius Caesar in the invasion of Ancient Rome.

St. Vitus's dance appears in Whence?, p. 21

St. Vitus was an Italian, Christian saint. He is the patron saint of entertainment and epileptics. St. Vitus's dance is another name for the neurological disorder named chorea. Chorea is when a person has involuntary, quick movements of the hands and feet.

enfilade appears in Old Houses, p. 26

An enfilade is a military position in which troops are subjected to fire from along the length of another line of troops.

eunuch appears in Inevitability, p. 67

A eunuch is boy or man who is castrated for a certain purpose.

scimitar appears in Babylon, p. 92

A curved sword with one edge of Oriental origin.



Scylla Charybdis appears in E.&O.E., p. 134

In classic mythology, Scylla was a sea monster. Charybdis was a great whirlpool. The idea of being between Scylla and Charybdis is the equivalent expression of being between a rock and a hard place. You can't win either way.

Lilliputian appears in Harlem Gallery, p. 213

An inhabitant of the island of Lilliput, where s/he is only six inches tall. Lilliput is in Jonathan Swift's book called Gulliver's Travels.

St. Elmo's Fire appears in Harlem Gallery, p. 229

St. Elmo's fire is a weather phenomenon that is often mistaken for a special type of lightning. Sailors often witnessed St. Elmo's fire at sea. St. Elmo is the patron saint of sailors.

pince-nez appears in Harlem Gallery, p. 297

Pince-nez were a type of glass spectacles worn in the nineteenth century. They pinch the bridge of the nose and have no earpieces. Theodore Roosevelt wore pince-nez.



Themes

Freedom of the Black Man

The overall theme of this poetry book is the freedom of the black man. The black man wants and needs freedom. Even in Tolson's time period around the 1920s to 30s of the Harlem Renaissance, long after slavery has been abolished, the black man is not free. The reader can see he is not free throughout the poetry, starting with "Rendezvous in America" where the black man helps found America and fights as a soldier for America, but he is a lesser man. Decisions are made on the black man's behalf by white men. This is especially evident in "The Town Fathers." As the fireworks of Fourth of July explode in the background, the white town elders decide on the town's name. They come up with a racist name. This signifies that the black man still does not have freedom. Freedom to the white man is alive with the Fourth of July celebration, but freedom of the black man does not exist, but he still doesn't matter.

"Libretto for the Republic of Liberia" symbolizes the freedom of the black man because it is an all-black state. Liberia is a country composed of African American former slaves and slaves from slave ships. The black man is free here because he is in an all-black society. But in America, blacks are still not free. In Harlem, in the Harlem Gallery, blacks are free to criticize and philosophize there, but once on the white man's streets, they are ignored. The Harlem Gallery represents the peanut gallery or cheap balcony seats set aside for blacks in the movie theaters during segregation. It is the 1920s-30s Harlem and blacks remain segregated and lesser than whites. They are not free in America.

Tolson's hope throughout this poetry book is for the freedom of the black man. He knows it is still a dream, not a reality, but he hopes someday his dream will come true.

The Black Hero

Throughout this poetry book, the black hero is of great importance. He is a man or a woman. The black hero is brave, fearless and unyielding in his fight to change the plight of the black man. Tolson mentions many heroes in the book, including Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, John Henry, Crispus Attucks, etc. They are martyrs in some way to the cause of freedom of the black man. The black hero symbolizes strength and brotherhood and no one is more revered than the black hero.

In "Rendezvous with America" the aforementioned black heroes help shape America. They also die for their country. In "The Big Game Hunter" and "The Idols of the Tribe" the African, dark-skinned man is the hero. In both poems, he puts his brethren first and protects them. In "The Big Game Hunter" the Zulu chief dies for his tribe, sacrificing himself to protect his people. However, we learn in "Abraham Lincoln of Rock Spring Farm" the black hero is a white man. The birth of Abraham Lincoln brings great joy because he is destined for greatness. In "Harlem Gallery" the black hero is John Henry.



again, as Hideho Heights recites a poem about him and the crowd goes crazy. John Henry, a black folklore symbol, is a man who raced a steam-powered hammer with his own little hammer and won. He died after the race. But John Henry is a black hero because he won over the white man's invention. In "Harlem Gallery" the black man who is an artist is also a hero. Many black artists, such as John Laugart and Mister Sparks, bring great art to the world, telling the story of black culture and then die unnoticed. They are martyrs and black heroes because they provide black culture to the masses.

Arts Sets A Black Man Free

Throughout this poetry book, Tolson discusses the black artist. He comes in many forms. He is a writer, poet, musician or painter. He loves to create and in this creation, he sets himself free. In "The Poet" the narrator discusses how the poet is above vanity and praise. He is humble and tells the real truth no one will. He sets himself free by exploring these truths and giving truth to society with the spoken and written word. The idea of spoken word as truth originates from African and American slavery tradition where blacks told stories and these stories were passed down from generation to generation in the family. The stories serve a family tree and history for most African Americans. The black artist is so revered because he tells these stories and keeps black culture alive. In doing this, he is set free by the words. No one can take away these poems and stories, not even the white man.

In "The Harlem Gallery" the black man is set free by art because the Harlem Gallery is a place where blacks can express themselves freely. This is due to the art work of black artists. The Curator creates a place for the black artist to be free and recognized, since his work is not welcome in white galleries. When paintings from black artists hang on the wall, the Gallery creates an atmosphere of freedom for criticism and judgment from other blacks. The Zulu Club is another place where art sets a black man free. A black poet or musician can go up on stage and speak, sing or play the words of truth. He speaks freely to the crowd who feeds off the truth. When a black man performs or does his art, he is truly free in that moment and creates freedom for the black man around him.

Style

Point of View

There are two major points of view in this book. The first is the first person point of view. In many poems, Tolson employs the "I" form to recite the poem. However, in the same poem, there is also a third person omniscient point of view. This view comes from an outside voice telling the tale of the poem. As Tolson uses both points of view interchangeably, the effect is one stanza told from a very close first person perspective and one stanza told from a third person, outside narrator perspective. For example, in "Harlem Gallery" the perspective of the narrator is told both first and third person. The poem begins in third person, giving a general description of the Gallery, but then as it continues on, Tolson uses the first person and we find out The Curator is the narrator. The Curator tells his story in both first and third person.

Often the points of views read like a novel, switching back and forth. The first person gives a very close and personal perspective as the narrator's true feelings are revealed. The third person gives an overview of the story, the place details or a generalized perspective of what takes place. The story is told in both exposition and dialogue. The exposition gives the reader a sense of setting, place and structure within the stanzas. The dialogue comes in quite often, especially when posing a philosophical question, teaching a lesson or telling a folklore tale.

Setting

The settings of the poems vary. The poems take place in the wilderness of America and in small towns across America. The poems also take place in bars, restaurants and nightclubs. The setting in the poems about America shows the Americana of the place, whether it's at the courthouse square on the Fourth of July or on the farm with Abraham Lincoln's family. Some of the poems also take place outside of America, in the great plains of Africa. The reader sees African animals and Zulu tribes roam the plains. Tolson also sets his epic poem "Libretto for the Republic of Liberia" in the African nation of Liberia, which serves as a location where African Americans are free.

The massive poem "Harlem Gallery" is set in Harlem, New York. The reader follows The Curator through the Harlem Gallery as s/he views black paintings and hears discourse from the black man. The reader also follows The Curator to the Zulu Club, a jazz and poetry slam nightclub in the midst of Harlem. Another setting is the Harlem Renaissance New York streets where The Curator and Doctor Nkomo philosophize over nothing. But the most important setting is the Harlem Gallery itself because it holds black culture and is the center for black artistry in Harlem. In the Gallery, the reader sees the multitude of colors and hears blacks take part in artistic discourse.



Language and Meaning

The language of the book is extremely intellectual and formal. It is riddled with allusions to Greek literature, Greek mythology, Egyptian literature, the Bible and ancient European history. A reader can understand the language, but with all of these allusions tucked into the words, it is difficult to decipher the meaning. This leads to obscurity in the text. Unfortunately, for Tolson, this obscurity caused him to be rejected by the black literati because his poetry was considered too "white" and over their heads. He was rejected by whites for being too black. Thus, the result is an extreme density of language and poetry that is very difficult to understand. When Tolson uses language simply, which is rare, it sounds like plains speak or the voice of a regular person during this time period. It is easy to understand, yet these glimpses of conversational English are few and far between.

Only in "Harlem Gallery" does Tolson break away from the overly dense language in a few notable stanzas. When Hideho Heights speaks, he sounds like a black jazz musician in the Harlem Renaissance. He speaks jive talk and sounds like a real person. However, the reader only receives glimpses of this jive talk because Hideho also speaks in dense lines with complicated allusions.

The language demonstrates Tolson's incredible intellectual and knowledge of history and literature. Many times though, the language and allusions are so complex and specific, the meaning is lost as to what Tolson tries to say. The result is this book's poetry is not widely read, not even in the black community.

Structure

The structure of each poem is very different. In general, the poems can range from half a page long, consisting of three stanzas, to the massive "Harlem Gallery" which is 154 pages long. The stanzas are divided into four lines per stanza. Each line can have anywhere from one word to seven words. Stanzas can also be much longer in length, consisting of 23 lines for example. Therefore, the structure of the poems as a whole is very loose. There is no general structure or hard and fast rule of structure that Tolson adheres to. He does not stifle creativity by maintaining one rigid form throughout the book.

The poems in a section are grouped by theme. For example, in the Woodcuts for Americana section, all the poems have an American-centered theme of freedom and the black man. The poems do not necessarily move in a linear fashion within the section. They move from place to place as well. But within each poem is a structured, linear movement. Each poem has a clear beginning, middle and end. Tolson organizes the structure of "Harlem Gallery" with the Greek alphabet, but there is no rhyme or reason for this.



The overall result is although each poem may vary in length and length of stanzas and lines, the poem from start to finish has a linear effect. The reader ends the poem with a final act.



Quotes

"In big John Henry, as his hammer beats / The monster shovel that quakes the mountainside." *Rendezvous with America*, p. 6

"When great dogs fight, the small dog gets a bone." *When Great Dogs Fight*, p. 17

"Our fatherland is the earth, / Our race is humanity." *Esperanto*, p. 31

"I am what I am not." *E.&O.E.*, p. 135

"You are / Black Lazarus risen from the White Man's grave." *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, p. 160

"God save the black / man's soul but not his buttocks from / the white man's lash." *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, p. 167

"America is my mother, / Liberia is my wife, / And Africa my brother." *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*, p. 169

"The Regents of the Harlem Gallery / suffer the carbon monoxide of ignorance." *Harlem Gallery*, p. 230

"The lie of the artist is the only lie / for which a mortal or god should die." *Harlem Gallery*, p. 233

"Are you hip to this, Harlem? Are you hip?" *Harlem Gallery*, p. 260

"The night John Henry is born an ax / of lightning splits the sky, / and a hammer of thunder pounds the earth, / and the eagles and panthers cry!" *Harlem Gallery*, p. 271

"My people, / my people— / they know not what they do." *Harlem Gallery*, p. 283

"So potent is one drop of African blood / that, in the zero of a second, it / can turn the whitest Nordic into a Negro." *Harlem Gallery*, p. 314

"The Afroamerican dilemma in the Arts— / the dialectic of / to be or not to be / a Negro." *Harlem Gallery*, p. 336



Topics for Discussion

One theme is the freedom of the black man. How is the black man not free throughout this book. Give specific examples. In the time period of the Harlem Renaissance, was the black man moving towards freedom? Is the black man free today?

What do you think of the language of the poem? Is it too complex? If so, how? Why does Tolson make the allusions to Greek literature and mythology and European history overall? What allusions did you think were most appropriate to what Tolson is saying?

Does Tolson convey a hope for the black man? If so, what is this hope? Also, how does one define hope in the context of this poem - is hope just freedom for the black man, or is it much more?

Out of all the black heroes Tolson mentions throughout his poem, which black hero is the most significant in American history? Why is the story of John Henry so important to African Americans? What does Henry represent and why is folklore such a dominant force in the African American community?

Why is the black artist so important to these poems, especially to "Harlem Gallery"? In the Harlem Renaissance, what did the black artist represent to both black and white society? Who defines what a black artist is — the black man or the white man?

Discuss the idea of the peanut gallery in African American history. Blacks sat in cheap balcony seats in movie theaters during segregation. This designated area was known as the peanut gallery. How is The Curator's Harlem Gallery like the peanut gallery? Is this idea of the peanut gallery present in the other Tolson poems, or in black literature today?

Discuss why Tolson's position as a black poet. He was not accepted by black or white scholars. Why do think that is? What about these poems puts Tolson in this unrecognized position and in no man's land in between the black and white cultures? How do you think Tolson should be identified as a poet?