Selected Poems of Langston Hughes Study Guide

Selected Poems of Langston Hughes by Langston Hughes

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction and Afro-American Fragments

Introduction and Afro-American Fragments Summary

Langston Hughes (1902 - 1964) was an African-American poet, essayist and social activist. He is arguably one of the most well-known American poets of the 20th century. Hughes, along with other black artists and intellectuals, is best known for his work during the Harlem Renaissance. This period in American social and cultural history is known as such because during the "Roaring 20s" and the "Jazz Age" of the 1930s that followed, Harlem became a Mecca for new ideas and a new creativity among blacks which garnered the attention of the entire world. At this time, there was an explosive resurgence in creativity and vitality within the African-American community which produced not only some of the most influential literature, dance, and visual art in American history, but which served as a testament to an exciting reawakening of the African American culture and overall spirit of cultural pride and awareness.

The Selected Poems of Langston Hughes was first published in 1958. The poems which appear in this volume were chosen by the author himself. The works are divided into thematic sections which highlight various aspects of the artist's experience of blackness in America. Some of the poems are no more than snippets of thought; others are songs in that they draw on rhythms and cadences identified with a number of different oral and aural (heard) traditions associated with Negro spirituals or jazz. Hughes was, in fact, the originator of what is known as "jazz style" poetry, incorporating elements found in popular music of the day.

SECTION I: AFRO-AMERICAN FRAGMENTS

"Afro-American Fragment" (Pg. 3):

The use of the word "fragment" in the poem's title signals the reader that there is something incomplete about the poem or its subject matter. In this case, the author addresses the displacement of African-Americans — from Africa to the USA during slavery times. The matter of distance is raised as both a geographical and a cultural reality for blacks at the time this piece was written. In addition, the poem serves as a kind of lamentation for the loss of place, culture, and by extension identity that many blacks experienced as a result of their (shared) past history in America.

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (Pg. 4):

Spiritual in tone, this piece connects black Americans to their cultural home, Africa. By focusing on rivers (Euphrates, Congo, Nile, Mississippi) the author recognizes and celebrates the black American journey from freedom into captivity and back again. It

also speaks to a feeling of transience in the African-American soul. Rivers imply movement and depth of feeling.

Introduction and Afro-American Fragments Analysis

The selections found in "Afro-American Fragments" are themselves fragments of verse. However, what is most important to realize about the title of the section is that the author (and the speakers in the selections contained therein) carry with them a feeling of personal fragmentation. African-Americans are perceived in these works as a people torn between North America and Africa, and yet not completely belonging to either one. Also, in some of the selections, the main idea is that the fragmented self is often unable to reconcile its two competing halves. This, in turn, maintains a tension of identity which comes through vividly in these poems. Blacks, in Langston Hughes' view, are the split subject. Whereas African-Americans can boast of a proud heritage before slavery, they must also claim their experiences during and after slavery as contributing as much if not more value to the modern African-American character.

The poems/verses in this section offer "reasons" for the fragmentation which impacts African-Americans. For example, the poem "Negro" addresses the roles that blacks have held throughout history. The piece itself is a chronology of oppression. The speaker points out, "I've been a slave [...] I've been a worker [...] I've been a singer [...] I've been a victim [...]" Interestingly, though, there is an undercurrent of triumph in this and the other poems in "Afro-American Fragments." The section closes with a song of celebration of the speaker's blackness and his/her ability to claim black skin as part of the natural world and therefore beautiful and ever-changing.

Section II: Feet O' Jesus

Section II: Feet O' Jesus Summary

"Feet o' Jesus" (Pg. 17):

Draws on the tradition of the Negro spiritual. The speaker lays his/her burdens at the foot of Christ's cross. Lamenting, the speaker looks to a belief in God for salvation and redemption.

"Prayer" (Pg. 18):

Contemplative piece. The speaker identifies a condition of uncertainty coupled with the realization that an answer can only come from his/her God.

"Shout" (Pg. 19)"

The congregation (the speaker) calls out to Jesus to be heard.

"Angels Wings" (Pg. 25):

This work speaks to the imperfection and fallibility of human beings while extolling the goodness and perfection of heavenly creatures.

"Judgment Day" (Pg. 26):

Eternal life and second chances. Having been saved from death, the speaker thanks Jesus for cleansing his/her soul and allowing his/her life on Earth to continue.

"Prayer Meeting" (Pg. 27)

This is more a vignette than a poem. The reader is given a small glimpse inside a baptist church. The "amen corner" where the old black woman sits is a section of a church where congregants could praise and worship more enthusiastically or to help the preacher with prayer requests.

"Spirituals" (Pg. 28):

The speaker refers to the power of song in the prayers of black women (specifically, the figure of the mother). This poem also includes popular features found in a great number of Negro spirituals: mountains, trees, roots, the ocean. Also, the speaker's inclusion of the phrase "the dead weight of sea" could be interpreted as a reference to the Dead Sea in Israel.

"Tambourines" (Pg. 29):

A return to song. The tambourine is an instrument which is often associated with gospel music as a way of "mak[ing] a joyful noise unto the Lord" as in Psalm 100 in the Bible.

Section II: Feet O' Jesus Analysis

Historically, African-Americans have been fervent proponents of Christianity. What complicates blacks' relationship with Christianity and Judeo-Christian religion in general is the fact that Christianity is the religion of the slave masters and not the original belief system of the slaves themselves. Before blacks were brought to the United States as property, many of them practiced polytheistic rituals, often centered around the natural world and its rhythms. The poems in this section reflect a belief in the Christian God with an African-American flavor. Having had their original culture, language, and traditions stripped from them and supplanted with a "white" God, blacks (in these poems, at any rate) have over time made Christianity their own by forming all-black congregations and churches. The language in these selections alternates between standard English and black English, which gives further evidence of the tension that exists between who African-Americans were (in times closer to slavery) and who they become in the 20th century. Many of the selections represent an old-fashioned kind of religion, one of fire and brimstone, of hell and fallen souls: "I ain't been good, / I ain't been clean— / I been stinkin', low-down, mean. / [...] Fire gonna burn ma soul!" (Pg. 20).

"Sunday Morning Prophecy" brings to life the typical black preacher in the pulpit who castigates his flock for taking their spiritual practice too lightly. The preface to the poem reads: "An old Negro minister concludes his sermon in his loudest voice, having previously pointed out the sins of this world [...]" Even before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. rose to prominence in the American Civil Rights movement, there were black preachers in the American consciousness. Black preachers, especially those involved in the evangelical or charismatic denominations are well-known for their fiery sermons. The cadence of their speech and the excitement they bring to the worship experience are unparalleled in American ecumenical circles. The darker side of this phenomenon, however, is the preacher who manages to ask for money after inducing guilt in the church-goers. This one facet (asking the congregation for money to save their own souls) constructs the preacher as something of a huckster as well. The piece ends on just such a note, as the preacher says, "And give freely / In the collection basket / That I who am thy shepherd / Might live." The irony here is that it is Jesus who is most often identified as the "good shepherd," not the pastor of a church.

Section III: Shadow of the Blues

Section III: Shadow of the Blues Summary

"The Weary Blues" (Pg. 33):

This piece is written in the cadence of a blues song. The speaker describes watching an old, black blues man playing the piano. The poem includes a blues lyric.

"Hope" (Pg. 35):

This poem is four lines in length. The rhyme scheme is ABCB. More a reflection than an actual verse, the speaker takes hope from his/her realization that even loneliness passes.

"Late Last Night" (Pg. 36):

Another piece written in the blues style. A short piece comprised of three short stanzas. The first stanza's rhyme scheme is ABCB. The second and third (shorter) stanzas reflect a rhyme scheme much like the first: ABCBDEB. In this piece, the speaker laments the loss of his lover's affection. This theme is common to American blues music. The speaker is sleepless and brokenhearted as a result of the lover's mistreatment: "You looked at me cross-eyed / And broke my heart in two—"

"Bad Morning" (Pg. 37):

Another brief poem of four lines with a simple ABCB rhyme scheme. The speaker's shoes do not match which is the source of his/her frustration. The author challenges the blues genre by turning such a minor matter as mis-matched shoes into a song lyric.

"Sylvester's Dying Bed" (Pg. 38):

The speaker (Sylvester) is on his death bed, singing about the women in his life who are not willing to let him go: "Black gals was a-beggin' / 'You can't leave us here!' / Brown-skins cryin', 'Daddy! / Honey! Baby! Don't go, dear!' However, like any other mortal, Sylvester has no control over when he goes and at one point, "the Lawd [puts] out the light."

"Wake" (Pg. 39):

Humorous four-line piece. The speaker instructs those attending the wake to "mourn in red" because he cannot see the utility of his death.

"Could Be" (Pg. 40):

Following a standard blues theme, the speaker bemoans the loss of a relationship. He states: "When you pawned my watch / You pawned my heart." This poem is four stanzas long, the first three have an ABCB rhyme scheme. The fourth stanza, however, rhymes ABAB.

"Bad Luck Card" (Pg. 41):

Having lost his lover, the speaker consults a gypsy who shows him a "bad luck card." The speaker is convinced that his luck has completely run out. Hughes switches up the rhyme scheme in this piece. The first stanza rhymes ABAB; the second stanza rhymes ABBB; the third stanza rhymes ABCB.

"Reverie on the Harlem River" (Pg. 42):

Returning to a standard blues motif, the speaker in this piece is awake and walking by the river during the middle of the night, examining his life and wondering what there is left for him to live for.

"Morning After" (Pg. 43):

Another humorous piece in which the speaker chides his lover for snoring so loud: "Please don't snore so loud. / You jest a little bit o' woman but you / Sound like a great big crowd". in this piece, the rhyme scheme is standard ABABAB.

"Early Evening Quarrel" (Pg. 44):

The speaker in this piece is a woman, Hattie, who recounts a conversation with Hammond, her lover. This is the woman's lament (blues style) about the wish to find a "Do-right man."

"Evil" (Pg. 45):

The title of the poem reflects the speaker's desire to pester someone until the other person's level of dissatisfaction matches his/her own. Four lines with an ABAB rhyme scheme.

"As Befits a Man" (Pg. 46):

Very much along the lines of "Sylvester's Dying Bed" on page 38, another male speaker fantasizes about how he would like his funeral to be. Typically, he expresses a wish to be surrounded by "a dozen pretty women / To holler, cry, and moan." The speaker continues, saying he is not afraid to die, but that he would prefer to have the funeral his own way.

Section III: Shadow of the Blues Analysis

The majority of selections featured in "Shadow of the Blues" are, in fact, blues lyrics that address the African-American condition. For instance, "The Weary Blues" on page 33 tells of a piano man and his troubles. The speaker notices a man on Lenox Avenue (in New York City) playing a tune and singing about his sorrows: "Ain't got nobody in all this world, / Ain't got nobody but ma self [...]" The piano man's troubles stem from his loneliness and isolation. Other "songs" are more humorous, dealing with matters of love and dying. The poem "Wake" instructs a person's mourners to wear red because s/he is unable to see the sense in being dead. In this section, too, the reader is given a glimpse of a common blues motif: relationships between men and women. In "Could Be" the speaker is left brokenhearted after his lover abandons him, but not without stealing his watch and pawning it first.

Jazz and blues were the music of the day for Langston Hughes. As art forms, both are quintessentially American and the contributions made by African-American performers and musicians would have been something with which Hughes was very much in tune. The lyrical structure of blues music lends itself well to uncomplicated lyrics that tell of life experiences common to people in general. The blues were borne out of the life struggles of its creators. Langston Hughes transformed blues music and lyrics into a poetic art form which has remained unparalleled well into the 21st century. The author's blues and jazz poetry draws on his ability to write for the masses while retaining elements of more standard written poetic form.

Section IV: Land and Sea

Section IV: Land and Sea Summary

"Havana Dreams" (Pg. 49):

The speaker, a traveler, muses about a beautiful Cuban woman: "Perhaps the dream is only her face—". As with other pieces in this collection, Hughes returns to the dream motif.

"Water-Front Streets" (Pg. 51):

The speaker in this poem reflects on the life of a sailor. Young men "put out to sea" season after season. The dream motif recurs in this piece.

"Seascape" (Pg. 53):

The speaker paints a picture of what he sees while sailing on a ship in the British Isles.

"Moonlight Night: Carmel" (Pg. 54):

Standing on the California shore, the speaker describes the ocean at night: "Tonight the waves march / In long ranks [...]" The portrait is somewhat romantic in its tone.

"Joy" (Pg. 57):

The speaker shifts his focus to the land as he searches for a young woman by the name of Joy. Sadly, he discovers her "[i]n the arms of the butcher boy".

"Snail" (Pg. 59):

The speaker marvels at the simplicity of a snail's life: "Weather and rose is all you know [...]".

"March Moon" (Pg. 60):

The speaker chastises the moon for being "naked" after her "cloud garments" are blown away by the wind.

"Fulfilment" [sic] (Pg. 63):

In this piece, the speaker and his love enjoy the pleasures of each other's company in the outdoors. The tone of the poem is light, and the poet uses anthropomorphosis (that is, he assigns human characteristics to an inanimate object) as a technique to describe the moon, as he likens her to "an old grandmother."

Section IV: Land and Sea Analysis

In this set of poems, the author takes the reader on a figurative tour of the world. From Havana to England, Ireland and even California, Hughes establishes himself as a true man of the world. This is the only group of poems in this collection not centered specifically on the black experience in the United States. What the reader needs to keep in mind is that the pieces were created by someone who viewed the world as boundless. Simultaneously intimate and expansive, these selections give way to a particular tenderness that is not readily apparent in other poems in this volume. For a moment, the author (and hence, the speaking subjects) focus attention on the world outside the bounds of oppression, racism, and African-American life struggles. Many of the poems deal with nature and natural phenomena. The poems in "Sea and Land" are romantic and at times wistful. The speakers talk about the moon, the ocean and the landscape. On another level, the author proves himself to be more than just a jazz and blues poet and more of an intellectual. For example, in the poem "Black Pierrot" the author makes use of the figure of a clown/mime whose origins date back to the Commedia dell'Arte tradition of performance from 15th century Italy. The proper name Pierrot is French for Pedrolino. The figure of the sad, silent clown lends depth and weight to the speaker's experience of rejection: In addition, Hughes also incorporates the Spanish language into his piece entitled "Havana Dreams."

These poems are especially tender in tone. One example of the author's sensitive nature is "Fulfilment" [sic] on page 63. A story of two lovers, the speaker says: "Day / Became a bright ball of light / For us to play with [...]" This poem and several others, including "Snail" and "Winter Moon" speak to the poet's acute awareness and connection to things in nature. This is certainly a departure from other poems which are grounded firmly in the urban, black experience. Of all the sections in this volume, "Sea and Land" exhibit Langston Hughes' ability to transport the audience out of Harlem while maintaining the soul which is at the center of his other, grittier works.

Section V: Distance Nowhere

Section V: Distance Nowhere Summary

"Border Line" (Pg. 81):

Interesting short study of "in between" states of existence. The speaker is decidedly positioned in the middle between here and there, living and dying.

"Suicide's Note" (Pg. 85):

Haunting three line, non-rhyming "verse." The suicide blames his/her demise on the river's request for a kiss.

"Juliet" (Pg. 89):

Addresses the character Juliet from the Shakespearean play Romeo and Juliet.

"Luck" (Pg. 99):

Examines the question of why some individuals are blessed with fortune while others are not.

"Song for Billie Holliday" (Pg. 102):

The speaker laments Holliday's sad end, while recollecting the bittersweet quality of the singer's voice and work.

Section V: Distance Nowhere Analysis

The poems in the section entitled "Distance Nowhere" concern different states of being and non-being. Hughes examines those places on the experiential continuum which qualify as neither here nor there in a figurative sense. The space between life and death and the space between heartache and resolution become spaces of broad possibility. These poems, some more than others, also consider the condition of loneliness as a kind of liminal (in-between) space which comes with its own set of issues. The poem "End" addresses the liminality of going from one state of existence to another. However, according to the speaker, there is no specific passageway between states of existence, they simply flow into one another in an organic fashion. The speaker says: "There is neither light / Nor dark / Outside the door. / There is no door!" In other words, life and death (or the specter of death) are simply as two sides of the same sheet of paper.

"Drum" on page 87 discusses the way in which death and life are intertwined. The poem portrays death's eventuality as a drum which continues to beat even in the face of life: "Bear in mind / That death is a drum / Beating forever [...] suggests that death outlasts

life in that its progression is contingent upon life's existence. Death, the poem points out, has an interminable cycle and that no part of the physical world is immune. Death will continue to overcome life "[u]ntil time is lost / And there is no air / And space itself / Is nothing nowhere [...]" And while death happens at a specific moment for all creatures and all processes, its insistence can be felt regardless of where one is in time or circumstance.

"One" and "Desert" both address in-between states of being by examining the natural world. In "One" on page 92, the Lincoln Prairies are representative of the openness of solitude and isolation. The specificity of the name "Lincoln Prairies" is of interest here. While the Lincoln Prairies may well be an actual location, it would be just as reasonable to assume a connection to Abraham Lincoln and his tenure as President of the United States. Taking this a step further, one could liken the Lincoln Prairies to the vast possibilities open to African-Americans with the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. However, this train of thought is purely speculative. Prairies are flat and wide-open, and sometimes the horizon blends into the landscape to paint a continuous picture of nothingness. Looking out into such a void may have the effect of leaving one with the feeling of utter desolation, "[l]onely / As a bottle of licker [sic] / On a table / All by itself." A bottle of liquor that sits by itself is, in effect, purposeless.

Section VI: After Hours

Section VI: After Hours Summary

"What?" (Pg. 108)

Humorous piece establishing the connection between a pimp and any other poor person. A pimp who wears the same clothes all year round is identified as a man who must, like any other man, make concessions based on income, or lack thereof.

"50-50" (Pg. 110):

The character Big Boy appears again in this piece. In this particular poem, Big Boy is an opportunist who uses women for sex and money.

"Miss Blues'es [sic] Child" (Pg. 113):

Lost love. The speaker compares the lover to the moon and the first star in the evening.

"Trumpet Player" (Pg. 115):

Mixes modern blues sentiment with the memory of slavery.

"Monroe's Blues" (Pg. 116):

The subject of this piece, a man named Monroe, sings the blues. The implication here is that he murdered his wife and her lover.

Section VI: After Hours Analysis

This section is aptly named. "After Hours" features selections which deal with topics and introduce ideas and concepts which would only be discussed by adults in the later hours of the evening. Topics range from gambling ("Midnight Raffle") to pimps ("What?") to teenage pregnancy and philandering. Matters of the heart play a prominent role in these selections; however, the seedier side of male/female relationships is also explored. And whereas the section immediately following "After Hours" also deals with love and loss, these poems introduce subjects which are not usually brought up in the daylight hours. Pimps and prostitutes, men cheating on their lovers are things usually dealt with behind closed doors. In Langston Hughes' day, the after-hours set would have consisted of those men and women who did their business (personal and otherwise) after the sun went down. During the 1920s, 30s and possible the 1940s, there were illegal clubs which operated after the legitimate establishments had closed for the night. Speakeasies and juke joints would have existed to offer otherwise stalwart, upstanding citizens some variety and perhaps a bit of clandestine entertainment. The final piece in this section, "Black Maria," typifies the era in which Hughes lived. A Black Maria is a

police van which was used take people to jail. Local law authorities would raid after hours clubs and take everyone on the premises, owners, operators and patrons alike, directly to jail.

Section VII: Life is Fine

Section VII: Life is Fine Summary

"Still Here" (Pg. 123):

The speaker recounts life's troubles and the scars those troubles have left. However, the speaker re-affirms his/her own resilience in the final line: "I'm still here!"

"Me and the Mule" (Pg. 125):

The speaker is defiant in his blackness, comparing himself to a mule that has "been a mule so long / He's forgot about his race." At this point in the speaker's life, he has come to accept himself as he is and is unconcerned about whether or not anyone else does.

"Midnight Dancer" (Pg. 129);

Song in praise of a woman with striking features: "Lips / Sweet as purple dew, / Breasts / like the pillows of all sweet dreams." There is a playful quality about this piece.

"Delinquent" (Pg. 133):

The character "Little Julie" is a rebellious teenager, possibly pregnant, extremely defiant. The last stanza, however, paints a picture of the teenager which signals that her bravado masks an awareness of her own neglected state.

"Homecoming" (Pg. 135):

A man arrives home only to find that his lover has left him. The impact of her absence is most deeply felt when the speaker notices how empty his bed is.

Section VII: Life is Fine Analysis

"Life is Fine" is the underlying theme of all the pieces in this section. Through ups and downs, challenges and setbacks, the tone of each selection is one of eventual celebration or at the very least reconciliation with one's circumstances. In the title piece, a speaker attempts to commit suicide after a woman mistreats him, but fails. In the end, the speaker realizes that even though his heart is broken, he must continue to live his life: "I could've died for love— / But for livin' I was born" (121). Similarly, "Still Here" and "Me and the Mule" are celebratory pieces concerning self-acceptance in the face of external circumstances which could potentially hold one back from enjoying life in spite of what others may say or do. The subjects in these poems are triumphant in their obstinance and determination to do more than simply get by. Even the threat of unemployment in the case of the speaker in "Fired" does not keep him from sleeping in

and enjoying "the sweetest dream / With Caledonia's arm / Beneath [his] head" (129). For the most part, these poems are lighthearted in their treatment of life's trials and tribulations.

Section VIII: Lament Over Love

Section VIII: Lament Over Love Summary

"Misery" (Pg. 143):

Standard blues rhythm "song." The speaker is a black woman whose "no-good man" has mistreated and abused her.

"Cora" (Pg. 146):

The speaker, Cora, vows to never involve herself with a man again because the men she loves do not reciprocate.

"Down and Out" (Pg. 147):

The female speaking subject in this piece asks her male lover to assist her financially: "Baby, if you love me / Help me when I'm down and out."

"Young Gal's Blues" (Pg. 148):

A young woman comes to the realization that youth and attractiveness are temporary.

"Lament over Love" (Pg. 153):

The speaker, feeling dejected because her man has abandoned her, sings the blues and contemplates suicide.

Section VIII: Lament Over Love Analysis

All of the poems in this section have a female subject and/or a female speaker. In "Lament Over Love," the author returns to his blues style lyric verse using a female voice and perspective. The songs are representative of the ups and downs of being in love with a man. Men in general are portrayed as dishonest, abusive, and mean: "He told me that he loved me / But he must a been tellin' a lie," provides and excellent example of the poems included here (151). And as with Hughes' other blues-oriented poems, at least one of the female speakers comes to the conclusion that sometimes the only thing to help a broken heart along is to listen to the blues. She says, "Black gal like me, / Black gal like me / 'S got to hear a blues / For her misery." Alongside the women who have been mistreated by their male companions are those who willingly participate in relationships with men, regardless of the consequences, because of a need to stave off loneliness and isolation. In "Young Gal's Blues," the speaker follows her friend's funeral procession to the graveyard. On the way, she contemplates what happens when a woman ages or when she is left to fend for herself without a man to provide for her. Addressing her male companion, she says, "Keep on a-lovin' me, daddy, / Cause I don't

want to be blue" (148). Much like the speaker in "Young Gal's Blues," Dorothy, subject of "Ballad of the Girl Whose Name is Mud," has no regrets about being involved with a "no-good man." Even after she is ostracized by the "good" people in her neighborhood, Dorothy is unapologetic when she admits to whoever will listen that she would repeat the experience. The point here is that some women (even in the face of firsthand experience) willingly relive their most painful moments.

Section IX: Magnolia Flowers

Section IX: Magnolia Flowers Summary

"Daybreak in Alabama" (Pg. 157):

The speaker expresses a sense of hope and racial unity in the American South. The operative word in this piece is "composer," which implies that reconciliation between diverse groups of people must be carefully, thoughtfully arranged by one who has a vision which transcends his/her own skin color.

"Mulatto" (Pg. 160):

In this poem, the speaker is a bi-racial man. At one point in history, mixed (black/white) people were known as mulattoes. The term is no longer used, as many view it as being overtly racist. The speaker bemoans the violation of black women at the hands of white men in the South during slavery and perhaps in general. The poem also features the "voices" of the bi-racial man's father and a sibling who is most likely white.

"Ronald Hayes Beaten (Georgia: 1942)" (Pg. 167):

A response to the beating of a black man in the South. It can be surmised that the author includes the date of the attack to prove that progress is slow and that at that time, there was still the necessity for vigilance among American blacks.

"Uncle Tom" (Pg. 169):

By definition, an "Uncle Tom" is a black man who is perceived as a race traitor by other blacks given the way he bows and scrapes in the presence of white people. This poem illuminates the self-hatred and lack of self-pride of one who has been oppressed by whites for so long.

"Song for a Dark Girl" (Pg. 172):

The speaker in this piece, a young African-American woman, mourns for her lover who has been hanged from a tree. She laments, "Love is a naked shadow / On a gnarled and naked tree." The repetition of the phrase "Way Down South in Dixie" functions as a pointed critique of the (still) popular eponymous song which features the lyrics "Oh, I wish I were in the land of cotton, / Old times there are not forgotten [...]" The use of the song in reference to abuses against African-Americans provides striking contrast by way of an alternate perspective of life in the South.

Section IX: Magnolia Flowers Analysis

"Magnolia Flowers" poems are all concerned with the South and its history from a black American perspective. Although magnolia flowers are sweetly scented and beautiful, when the flowers die, they give off a sickly odor. The magnolia flower is a symbol of the best and the worst elements of the South. From slavery to lynchings; from the Ku Klux Klan to the plight of black sharecroppers, these poems are rife with the undercurrent of pain and trauma associated with living in places like Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi. For Langston Hughes, there are layers of sadness and disappointment that a region so lush and verdant could also be so terrifying and horrific. The South becomes an entity, unaware of its own barbarity and backwardness. Individually, these poems are disturbing. Considered as a larger group, they paint a portrait of what is deeply embedded in the African-American psyche. The concept of "cultural memory" comes into play with poems like "Uncle Tom" and "Porter," which remind the reader of the depth of hatred (conscious or unconscious) responsible for fostering caricatures of blacks (especially black men) that continue to inform American society at large. "Roland Hayes Beaten (Georgia: 1942)" reflects an underpinning of anger in response to the brutalization of a black man over 60 years ago. The rhetoric may have been created in the 1940s, but the general tone of "a revolution to come" resurfaces even today whenever racial violence is perpetrated against non-whites. Of special note in this section is the poem "Daybreak in Alabama" because it is the only piece included here that actually offers a hint of the possibility of racial reconciliation (157). That is to say, the speaker (a composer) envisions a time when his creations will resonate with whites and blacks alike. "Daybreak" refers to the time of day when the sun is on the rise, but it also speaks to a coming to consciousness which the speaker hopes will come to pass in the South. When the day "breaks" it literally frees itself from the night and causes illumination of things which seem threatening and mysterious in the dark.

Section X: Name in Uphill Letters

Section X: Name in Uphill Letters Summary

"Stars" (Pg. 188):

The speaker entreats a young black boy in Harlem to "[take] just / One star." Taking a star is synonymous with reaching for something higher, more noble and outside the self in order to make one's dreams come true.

"Note on Commercial Theatre" (Pg. 190):

A black person comments on the way in which his/her music has been appropriated by whites for financial gain. The speaker comments on the phenomenon of "borrowing" black music for use in stage and film productions that are not about blacks, such as Bizet's opera "Carmen" and William Shakespeare's "Othello."

"Merry-Go-Round" (Pg. 194):

A young black child asks a carnival employee where the segregated rides are. The poet uses this vignette as a comment on the way in which many blacks simply assumed that segregation (also known as "Jim Crow") was prevalent in the North as well as the South.

"Third Degree" (Pg. 197):

The subject of this piece is a black man being interrogated and abused by police. The speaker recounts the torture he undergoes before acquiescing to the policemen's insistence that he sign a confession under duress: "When you throw / Cold water on me, / I'll sign the / Paper..."

"The Ballad of the Man Who's Gone" (Pg. 198):

A ballad is, by definition, a kind of song which tells a story. In this particular poem, the speaker comments on the emotional and financial cost of a black man dying. The tone of the piece suggests that death can be just as expensive as life, perhaps more so, because the burden of raising money falls on those left behind.

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Section X: Name in Uphill Letters Analysis

In this section, the author's attention turns to the African-American experience of living in the North. Physically moving from the southern United States to the North (or even the West) is equated with a type of liberation from slavery for blacks who were born

much later. That is to say, in a figurative sense, African-Americans who managed to extricate themselves from the South were responsible for their own "emancipation" from an economic, intellectual and psychological standpoint. The poems are reflective of the many African-Americans' hope for a better future. The poems "Mother to Son," "Stars," and "To Be Somebody" (pages 187, 188 and 189, respectively) directly address the passing on of the dream from one generation to the next. Interestingly, the poems retain a consciousness of times past in the African-American experience while instructing the young to continue making forward progress. Even though there is mention of the oppression of blacks, there is an overriding feeling of belief in better days ahead. Also, these three pieces deal specifically with imagination as significant contributor to realizing one's potential. The "dream" Langston Hughes refers to so often is a thread which weaves itself through these poems.

Conversely, "Name in Uphill Letters" also deals with the challenges and obstacles associated with the northward African-American migration. Matters of police brutality, poverty, and white appropriation of African-American cultural property remain prevalent concerns for blacks in urban areas such as Chicago and New York City. Another facet of living in the North is racism of a different sort. The specter of internalized racism directed onto one group of blacks by another is the theme of "Seashore through Dark Glasses (Atlantic City)" on page 192. In it, blacks from different geographical locations are positioned at odds with one another. No explanation is given for one group of blacks' disdain for another, but it is reasonable to assume that perhaps light-skinned versus dark-skinned and socio-economics play a role. This phenomenon is re-visited in "Low to High" and "High to Low" in the section "MONTAGE OF A DREAM DEFERRED."

Section XI: Madam to You

Section XI: Madam to You Summary

"Madam's Past History" (Pg. 201):

The first piece in this section introduces the reader to Madam Alberta K. Johnson. The author writing in Madam's voice chronicles the character's work and financial history. This piece also establishes Madam as a streetwise individual who will go to any reasonable length to make money in order to support herself. Also, something of Madam's relationship history with men is revealed. At one point, Alberta admits entering into a business venture with a man she describes as "no-good." Heartbreak and financial misfortune notwithstanding, however, Madam Alberta K. Johnson is resilient and determined to succeed, no matter what.

"Madam and the Rent Man" (Pg 204):

Alberta K. Johnson has a run-in with the landlord. Madam tells the landlord that the rent will remain unpaid until such time as repairs are made. The landlord informs Madam that he is simply doing his job: "It's not up to me. / I'm just the agent, / Don't you see?" Madam's responds, accusing the landlord of passing the buck. The situation goes unresolved, with Madam holding her position. The landlord leaves empty-handed.

"Madam and the Phone Bill" (Pg. 207):

In this piece, Madam has an argument with the telephone company over a long distance call from a man by the name of Roscoe who lives in Kansas City. Roscoe phones to tell Madam that he loves her. Madam is nonplussed, given the fact that Roscoe is in a different part of the country and that Roscoe reversed the charges on the phone call. Madam gives her usual sassy response, telling the operator ("Central") that she will not pay.

"Madam and the Wrong Visitor" (Pg. 212):

Madam mistakenly opens her door to "Old Death." Alberta K. Johnson refuses to accompany Death. The character wakes up in the hospital, having just broken a fever. Madam triumphs over death, proving herself to be a woman of strong will and determination.

"Madam and the Census Man" (Pg. 217):

When the U.S. Census worker shows up at Alberta K. Johnson's door, the two of them engage in a comical conversation. Apparently, Madam (as she prefers to be called) has no actual name, just the initial K. The Census man tells her that just having an initial instead of an actual middle name, "[makes her] name too short." Not surprisingly, Madam gives the man a salty reply and tells him to remove the "Mrs." designation from

her name as well. The last stanza reads: "Furthermore, rub out / That MRS., too— / I'll have you know / It's Madam to you!"

Section XI: Madam to You Analysis

Alberta K. Johnson ("Madam") is a character invented by Langston Hughes who is featured in a number of his poems. The works chosen for this volume (and those not appearing here) all have to do with a street-wise, sassy, stereotypical black woman living on her own. Madam, as she is known to those outside her circle of family and close friends, is a woman who thinks well of herself in spite of her faults and failings, which she readily admits. It is a term denoting class and breeding. It is also a term that the character uses to address her white employer. Madam (Mrs. Johnson) does not allow the system to manipulate her. Rather, Madam stalwartly refuses to buckle under pressure applied to her by various whites in society; the telephone company, the U.S. Census, and her sleazy landlord. Madam is a model of self-preservation and self-promotion who has been involved with one "low-down" man too many. And although she has male admirers, she prefers to keep them at a distance as romantic entanglements tend to confuse her and keep her emotionally off-balance. Also, Madam admits that a good man would probably be too good for her anyway. Each vignette reveals something intriguing about Madam Alberta K. Johnson. Twice married, it is not known exactly how Madam manages to support herself financially. However, given Madam's description of her own financial history, one can only assume that whatever Madam does for money is likely to be illegal or at the very least rather shady.

That the character prefers to be called Madam calls attention to one Madam C.J. Walker. Madam Walker was the first American woman to become a self-made millionaire. A child of slaves, Walker was a hairdresser who eventually settled in New York City at the turn of the 20th century. C.J. Walker was an entrepreneur who developed and marketed the first line of African-American beauty and hair care products. She was also a generous philanthropist, patron of the black arts during the Harlem Renaissance, and a well-loved employer who paid African-American female employees a competitive living wage for the first time in history. Walker's daughter was Langston Hughes' contemporary and friend; she supported many black artists during the Harlem Renaissance.

Section XII: Montage of a Dream Deferred

Section XII: Montage of a Dream Deferred Summary

"Preference" (Pg. 225):

In this segment, the speaker expresses his preference for women "six or eight an' ten years older'n [himself]. The man claims that younger women will use a man for his money and material goods. Older women, on the other hand, are more likely (and more willing) to put a man's needs ahead of their own.

"Drunkard" (Pg. 244):

A brief reflection on deadening one's feelings with alcohol. The piece follows the drinker, figuratively, from happy intoxication into utter despair.

"High to Low" (Pg. 250):

This piece gives voice to middle-class ("high") black prejudice against lower-class ("low"), un(der)educated blacks. The speaker accuses the low blacks of undermining the racial progress being made by "high" blacks like himself.

"Subway Rush Hour" (Pg. 265):

A short meditation on blacks and whites riding the subway together. The speaker says that blacks and whites are so close together on a subway car that there is no room for fear.

"Harlem" (Pg. 267):

Langston Hughes' most famous poem. It begins, "What happens to a dream deferred?" The question is both rhetorical and actual. In this case, the dream Hughes' speaker refers to is the dream of equality for African-Americans. Not coincidentally, black American Lorraine Hansberry's Tony Award-winning Broadway play is entitled A RAISIN IN THE SUN. It was the playwright's homage to Langston Hughes and his idea of a Black American Dream. The question, "What happens to a dream deferred?" could be re-interpreted as, "What happens when dreams are put off until some later day?" or "Does deferring a dream mean that the dream will never come true?" Finally, the question becomes, "How long can a dream be denied before it simply refuses to be contained?"

Section XII: Montage of a Dream Deferred Analysis

"Montage of a Dream Deferred" is a lengthy work divided into pieces which form a collage of sorts around one particular theme: the dream. The dream itself could be the dream of freedom, of equality, of belonging. For Langston Hughes, the dream was all of these. The freedom Hughes realizes in each of these poems is multivalent (valued for more than one reason) and fluid. The entire work has as its major themes the urban life of African-Americans, jazz, blues and be-bop (which came into existence during the 1940s), love, death and redemption. Some of the pieces are straightforward and deal with blatant racism or unemployment. Others subtly address matters of self-worth and social responsibility. Perhaps the best-known of any of Hughes' poems is "Harlem." The question: "What happens to a dream deferred?" is one of the most famous lines in the canon of American poetry. Its use by Langston Hughes, however, refers specifically, pointedly, to blacks in this country and perhaps to white "onlookers." The speaker wants to know what happens to one's heart's desire when that desire is pushed to the side repeatedly, in favor of more immediate concerns. Harlem is the seat of the deferred dream. Harlem, for Langston Hughes, was the center of a particular experiential universe which only a relatively few blacks would ever have the opportunity to witness. The montage Hughes creates with rhythm and words maintains a center which bears out the insistence of his speaker's question: What happens when a dream, a wish, a true desire for liberty is simply left unattended or uncultivated? In truth, many possibilities exist when one deals in intangibles. However, the point Hughes is trying to make is that a dream deferred becomes a moment deferred, an opportunity deferred and eventually, an entire life set aside and neglected. To defer a dream, any dream, for too long is a waste of life energy. A waste of life itself.

Section XIII: Words Like Freedom

Section XIII: Words Like Freedom Summary

"I, Too" (Pg. 275):

The speaker begins by saying, "I, too, sing America." Identifying himself as "the darker brother" the speaker visualizes a time when white America will no longer be able to deny the African-American man's right to sit at the table of equality and freedom.

"Lunch in a Jim Crow Car" (Pg. 280):

Ostensibly a short poem about eating in a segregated train car, the speaker entreats African-Americans to bide their time until segregation ("Jim Crow") implodes and destroys itself.

"In Explanation of Our Times" (Pg. 281):

This prose piece imagines a time when non-whites all over the world rise up in social rebellion against whites who have wielded the power for hundreds of years.

"Africa"' (Pg. 284):

A celebration of the new, awakening Africa. The supposition here is that the continent of Africa, after "resting awhile" has finally awakened and come into its own power.

"The Negro Mother" (Pg. 288):

Examines the role of black mothers in the push toward African-American freedom, beginning during the time of slavery in the U.S. Mothers carry the black race forward by protecting and nurturing their offspring. Historically, black women have enjoyed greater potential for social mobility than their male counterparts. It is for this reason that the black mother in this poem takes responsibility for ensuring the freedom of her race.

Section XIII: Words Like Freedom Analysis

The final section in The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes, "Words Like Freedom" deals with being an American, not just an African-American. These poems address larger concerns of democracy and freedom and equality for all those in the United States. The tone of the poems is lofty and sweeping, and the author connects non-slavery American history to African-Americans. None of these poems feature vernacular language, which is in keeping with the breadth and universality of the underlying principles of sacrifices in war, personal liberation, and America's future. Interestingly, the author includes one poem written about Africa in this portion of the volume. The piece seems out of place, surrounded by poems which are somewhat nationalistic in nature.

However, if one were to analyze the author's choice, it could be said that Hughes is including Africa in his vision of how America should and could be. That is to say, writing in praise of modern Africa is one way that the author pays tribute to part of his personal history that was at one time to painful to examine. Here, however, Hughes throws wide the doors of his vision for liberty to include the continent which was also impacted by the slave trade. By far, the most uplifting piece in the collection is the last one, "Freedom's Plow."

"Freedom's Plow" presents a portrait of America which includes all races and all people living here. The author traces American history back to the Puritans' arrival at Plymouth Rock in Massachusetts as the birthplace of the American dream. According to the speaker, what began as a land of refugees has become the land of the free not because of the contributions of only one group, but because of the work and toil and sacrifice of many different kinds of people. This is the America of Langston Hughes' dream; a country conscious of the contributions made by everyone who lands on the shores. He stresses the importance of hard work and sharing in the building of a solid social foundation built on principles which transcend (go beyond) questions of skin color or ethnicity. In the speaker's view, the labor that went into building America was first and foremost a labor of love. Not romantic or self-love, but a love for the foundations established by men like Thomas Jefferson and others who developed the system of governance still in place today: "America! / Land created in common, / Dream nourished in common [...] / Who is America? You, me!" (297).

Characters

Big Boyappears in Catch and 50-50

Big Boy is a character who appears twice in this collection of Langston Hughes' poetry. The author does not offer much information about the character's personality in "Catch," other than his going fishing for a mermaid wife. However, in the poem "50-50" Hughes establishes Big Boy (in this instance, anyway) as a man who takes advantage of women in order to meet his own physical and financial needs. Big Boy is the only named male character featured in this volume. In other selections, Hughes does include portraits of men who are just like Big Boy in their unselfconscious abuse of black women. Specifically, in the section "Lament Over Love," men are seen as no-account, opportunistic and generally untrustworthy.

Alberta K. Johnson (Madam)appears in Madam to You

Alberta K. Johnson is a black woman with strong opinions and a forthright attitude. "Madam" as she prefers to be known, has been married twice and has worked all her life. Alberta is all about business and she does not rely on anyone else to make her luck. Madam does not trust men who treat her like a real woman. She has grown accustomed to being let down and having her heart broken by men. In addition to working in white people's homes as a domestic, Alberta K. Johnson has tried her hand at various businesses with limited success. At one point, Madam owned and operated a "hair-dressing parlor." Shortly thereafter, she opened a barbecue stand only to realize that the man she chose as her business partner (most likely an unreliable lover) was less than trustworthy. Madam Alberta lives in Harlem. The interactions she has with the phone company, her minister, even the landlord, reveal Madam as someone who is virtually unafraid of confrontation. It is unclear from the poems included in this volume exactly how Madam earns a livelihood, but it is reasonable for one to assume the character lives by her wits and manages to live reasonably well, if precariously.

The Negro Motherappears in The Negro Mother

In the poem of the same title, the Negro Mother is established as the supreme caregiver and nurturer of the black race in America. Through the trials of slavery, raising white children even when hers were taken from her and sold, the Negro Mother held a vision of freedom and independence for the generations which followed. A symbol of hope and the promise for a better future, the Negro Mother is a representation of fierce determination and ancestral remembrance. The mother is the keeper of the oral tradition. She is the person/persona to turn to when times are difficult because she is capable of unconditional love as well as unyielding support. The Negro mother believes in God fervently and trusts Him to care and provide for her, her children, and her children's children. Her God is the planter of dreams in the black American soul. Her

God is the one who makes all things possible. Hughes' Negro mother is never without a prayer on her lips and in her heart. The Negro Mother realizes that although she may never see freedom, those who follow her will build on the progress she is able to make. This figure of African-American womanhood has a spine of steel and unwavering compassion for those closest to her heart.

Mexican Market Womanappears in Mexican Market Woman

An old woman featured in the poem of the same name, she sits in the sun and sells "her scanty wares." The speaker, however, recognizes that this old woman is connected to the land and the sun in an undeniable way. Her skin has been baked brown because she spends most of her time inside. This establishes the character as poor and humble. Had she been a city woman, her skin would be pale, indicating her lack of connection and resonance with the natural world. Also, the woman is at an advanced age, which means that living exposed to the elements is somehow healthful not just for the body but for the mind and spirit as well. Although it is obvious from the poem that the woman does not have much, what she knows and what she has seen of "high wind-swept mountains" makes her a rare creation. Hughes makes a point of saying that the woman's skin is "so brown." The speaker renders the words with a certain amount of awe and affection. The portrait of the "ancient hag" as she is called, is actually a kind of a love song.

Ruby Brownappears in Ruby Brown

Ruby Brown (also the title of the poem) is a young black woman living in the small town of Mayville. Ruby's skin is golden brown, "like the sunshine / That warmed her body." The character works as a domestic for a woman by the name of Mrs. Latham. Polishing the silver one day, Ruby realizes that Mayville offers her little. There is no future for her in such a small town, and Mayville presents almost nothing in the way of money-making opportunities for a young black women with even moderate ambitions. Ruby is also in search of some kind of joy in life.. She longs to satisfy her soul in some way. It is not difficult to understand her conflicting feelings of stagnation and restlessness. As a young woman, Ruby is certain that there is more to life than simply cleaning white women's houses and being paid next to nothing. Ruby, bored, underemployed and hungering for some excitement in life, becomes a prostitute. It seems that Ruby (in this instance) functions as a representation of the thousands of young black women who come from similar backgrounds. That is, Ruby is a "good" girl who makes a less than wise choice based on economic necessity. Furthermore, one should also recognize that Ruby chooses prostitution because there are no other viable options for a woman such as herself. Her worldview is limited, most assuredly, by her experience as an unmarried, exuberant, uneducated black woman in the South. The last lines of the poem sum up Ruby's experience: "But the white men, [...] / Pay more money to her now / Than they ever did / When she worked in their kitchens." As happened in slavery, Ruby re-

commodifies herself. That is, she returns to the mind set of slavery, in that she offers herself as property to be bought and used for pleasure rather than labor.

Monroeappears in Monroe's Blues

Monroe is a man who "sings a little blues." His lover and his friend are dead. The implication here is that Monroe is responsible for their deaths. If this is true, then Monroe committed a crime of passion, another element often associated with the blues and the right to sing the blues. The character is distraught over the deaths of his wife and friend. So much so, in fact, that his depression renders him incapable of going out and earning a living. The line "Monroe's fell on evil days" suggests that Monroe's life circumstances have taken a turn for the worse. The fact that he sings a "little" blues signals the reader that Monroe's anguish is so deep-seated that the most he can manage is nothing more than a whimper.

Billie Holidayappears in Song for Billie Holiday

The poem "Song for Billie Holiday" was written for and about the famous American jazz and blues singer of the same name. Holiday's life was tragic, but the tragedy of her circumstances was what fueled her to be able to sing the blues so richly and so well. Hughes' question, "What can purge my heart / Of the song / And the sadness?" speaks to the listener's inability to separate Holiday's music from the life she lived. In the second stanza, the speaker poses another question: "What can purge my heart / But the song / Of the sadness?" Here, the reader is being asked to recognize the utility of Holiday's music as somehow purgative. Her music, for the speaker, has the power to cleanse and purify one's heart. Billie Holiday (also known as "Lady Day") died in 1959. Her life was marred from the beginning by sexual abuse, poverty, drug abuse and alcoholism. Nevertheless, she is still considered one of the most talented and tormented figures in American jazz.

Harlem, New York City, New Yorkappears in Harlem

While it is a city, Harlem, to Langston Hughes, was much more than just a geographical location. To the author, and certainly to others born and living there during the 1920s and 1930s, the city was an entity in and of itself. During the rebirth of Harlem, there was an electricity, a vibrancy that was unmistakable to those residing there. Harlem was the center of black life in New York City. It was alive with jazz (and later be-bop) and the mood was one of progress, hope and possibility. Harlem was its own music, its own place and Hughes and others were well aware of the effect the city had on on them. Multi-layered and fluent in its own kind of blues, the city became a haven for black Americans and even today it reflects a certain character and representation of blackness in America that is strongly felt.

The Trumpet Playerappears in Trumpet Player

It is obvious from his writings that Langston Hughes placed music (jazz, blues, be-bop) and musicians like the trumpet player in a category of their own. In the poem entitled "Trumpet Player" the musician, while a modern man, still represents something of black America's past. The notes from his trumpet sound sweet and low-down, but the notes also register to remind the speaker of the bittersweet experience of the African-American life. There is remembrance of slavery in the trumpet player's eyes, and yet he continues to romance the horn, calling up desire and ecstasy. At the same time, his music is a drug to his soul. He cannot help playing his trumpet as it is part of what feeds his soul.

Dorothyappears in Ballad of the Girl Whose Name is Mud

Dorothy is the subject of a poem entitled "Ballad of the Girl Whose Name Is Mud." The character by all accounts was raised in a proper, sober home. However, this fact seems to have escaped Dorothy, who gets "in trouble" because of her involvement with a man of dubious integrity. The assumption here is that Dorothy has become pregnant. The father of Dorothy's baby abandons her and Dorothy is subsequently shunned by the decent people in her neighborhood. No one will have any dealings with Dorothy and she is branded a "hussy" and promiscuous. Most unfortunate, however, is Dorothy's own admission that given the opportunity she would behave the same way. What is most shocking is the fact that no one ever hears Dorothy complain about being mistreated and walked out on by such a low character. That Dorothy would willingly entangle herself with the same man or another just as disreputable proves that upbringing can only do so much for a person.

Objects/Places

Havana, Cubaappears in Havana Dreams

The author includes Havana in this section as an emblem of the exotic. The speaker shows his familiarity with Havana and the surrounding areas by mentioning places recognizable only to someone who has been there.

Irelandappears in Seascape

Briefly mentioned in the poem "Seascape," Ireland is one of two locations mentioned by a sailor who is far away from home.

Carmel, Californiaappears in Moonlight Night

In the poem "Moonlight Night: Carmel" the speaker stands on the shore listening to the waves, looking at the moon and taking in the romance of it all.

Beale Streetappears in Beale Street

Beale Street is located in Memphis, Tennessee, known in the music industry as "the birthplace of the blues." In the poem of the same name, Hughes' speaker associates Beale Street with his personal feelings of having the blues.

Taosappears in A House in Taos

Taos, New Mexico is the location of the speakers home in the poem "A House in Taos." From his house, the speaker is able to witness the beauty and unpredictability of nature: sun, rain, moon and wind.

Drumsappears in Various poems

Drums figure prominently in many of Langston Hughes' poems. Drums represent not only the rhythm of the human heart, but a drum is also a way to call up the African past of blacks in America. There is something in the beat of a drum, according to Hughes' poetry, which renders itself irresistible to the hearer. One has no choice but to respond to the drum beat with movement and feeling.

The Bluesappears in Various poems

The blues, it would seem, are unavoidable for anyone who feels, loves, mourns or dies. Not simply a type of music, the blues are an existential state of being and mind.

The Southappears in Daybreak in Alabama

The American South (Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi) is the seat of much pain and confusion for African-Americans. Many blacks born and raised in the South are attached to its beauty, its mystery, and its familiarity. Conversely, blacks also experience fear and suspicion in the South, given the history of race relations in the area before and after slavery.

Ku Klux Klanappears in Ku Klux

The ultimate symbol of hatred and intimidation for African-Americans and other ethnic and racial groups. The Klan represents the worst characteristics of whites in America as well as the shame still present in the American consciousness today because of the group's brutality against blacks.

Magnoliasappears in Magnolia Flowers

The magnolia flower symbolizes the sweetness and gentility of what once was the serene, bucolic American South. Magnolias are delicate and comely. However, magnolias, when they are dying, can be cloying and suffocating.

Themes

Dreams

Dreams is one motif that weaves itself through this entire volume. In fact, the concept of the dream, a dream or the act of dreaming appears no fewer than 17 times in this collection. In each piece, the characters and/or narrator talk about dreams in both literal and figurative terms. For instance, in the poem "As I Grew Older" the speaker reminisces about times past and the nature of the dream he had as a young man. Most importantly, however, the dream motif is most prevalent in the penultimate section entitled "Montage of a Dream Deferred." This section contains the poem "Harlem," which is certainly Hughes' most well-known, thoroughly studied piece. On the surface, the dream which is the most important is what is known as the American Dream. The American Dream is what brings people into the United States even today. Living the American Dream means that one lives in prosperity, has a successful business or job, a spouse and a family. The American Dream also refers to the black American's dream of living in peace and prosperity, without the threat of violence or racial oppression. This dream is what travels through many of Langston Hughes's works. One could say that the author was extremely preoccupied, if not obsessed, with the idea of black people living free and without fear in their own country.

For Langston Hughes and other African-Americans of his time, the dream began with grandparents and great grandparents who had been slaves or who were descended from slaves. Through generations of black Americans ran a desire to be equal under the law and equal in terms of social mobility as well. In the 1920s and 1930s, black men and women were still being terrorized by racism in their communities and to some extent by their own government. Hughes saw the dream of freedom and equality for blacks in America as something which had been put off time and again, hence, the dream deferred. Another facet of this deferment, however, is the ways in which Hughes saw blacks getting in their own way. The more humorous pieces dealing with male/female relationships offer a telling commentary on the author's views concerning self-worth and internalized racism.

Freedom

Langston Hughes deals with freedom from the vantage point of former slaves and 20th century African-Americans. He addresses the question of freedom concerning slaves in several selections in this volume. Likewise, the question of freedom presents itself as something simultaneously tangible and intangible for blacks of the 20s and 30s (and possibly the 1940s). Like dreams, freedom is something which can be experienced internally, as in the mind, and externally, as in society. Many of the poems included here deal with the tangible freedom of equal rights for blacks in the United States. More importantly, though, Hughes privileges the African-American man/woman's ability to retain a feeling of internal freedom which is not contingent upon what happens in the

external world, outside the self. Dreams and freedom and dreams of freedom are inextricably linked in Hughes' poetry. In addition, many of the subjects in Hughes' poems are also looking for the freedom to express themselves creatively through dance and music. Examples of individuals who dance, sing, and play instruments as a way to "free" themselves include the poems "The Trumpet Player," "Danse Africaine," and "The Weary Blues." Worth noting also is the way in which the subjects in these pieces are somehow compelled to express themselves creatively. For Hughes' subjects, this type of freedom of self-expression often mitigates the effects of living in a racist society.

History

While the history of blacks in the United States is the subject of a number of these poems, the author also takes African history into account. In "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," the speaker makes reference to the Congo, the Nile and the Euphrates, all three ancient rivers which flow on the African continent and whose existence and importance pre-date the American slave trade and the pain and destruction it brought. For Hughes, the black experience in Africa serves as a counterpoint to what black men and women have gone through in this country. Also, Hughes makes a point of emphasizing the grandeur and dignity of Africa and its history as a way to uplift the African-American race. In doing so, Hughes challenges African-Americans to draw on the strength of their ancestors as a way to deal with the injustices done to blacks on this continent. In "Afro-American Fragment," the speaker recognizes the fabricated history found in textbooks and encourages African-Americans to look beyond what whites have constructed as their history or history in general. This very act of exposing the lie of the so-called legitimate, Euro-American version of events also serves to call into question the validity of anything created by oppressors and labeled as "true."

Possibility

Description

Style

Point of View

The majority of the poems in this volume make use of the omniscient narrator—that is to say, someone who is not necessarily the author himself is the principle speaking subject. However, there are a number of selections which reflect a specific character's perspective. For example, in the section "Madam To You," the principle speaker is Alberta K. Johnson (known to those outside her family and close circle as "Madam"). By using a specific voice, Hughes is able to give the reader an insight into that subject's inner workings rather than simply telling the reader about a specific character. This is most effective, in that it allows the reader to enjoy the author's talent for assuming a variety of voices. Also, the selections which are "narrated" by a particular character add a depth to the collection overall and give the entire volume a kind of texture not found in more traditional volumes of poetry. There are instances in which the author utilizes more than one voice in a single selection. An example of multiple speaking subjects is found in "Mulatto" on page 160. In this piece, the primary speaking subject is a (presumably) young bi-racial man who alternately addresses his white father and a white sibling. The effect of this multi-vocal technique is one of witnessing a conversation. Similarly, in "Deferred" on page 252, Hughes again employs the multi-vocal approach; only in this piece the utterances represent a variety of unnamed blacks who discuss their wants, wishes, and desires. The author is particularly adept at writing from varied perspectives, which implies a sensitivity to the thoughts, feelings, and circumstances of others not often borne out in a writer's work. Using more than one voice also substantiates the claim that Hughes was very well acquainted with his audience and their inner thoughts and feelings.

Setting

Langston Hughes saw the entire world as a palette for his poetry. Admittedly, as a black American poet from Harlem, he draws on his experiences as a resident of that section of New York City in the majority of his works. However, there are also poems featured in this collection which mention places as far afield as Cuba, Mexico, Ireland, England, and of course, Africa. It can be argued that the section entitled "Sea and Land" gave the author an opportunity to prove to readers (both black and white) that he was a black man who had life experiences in the world at large and not simply in Harlem, the greater New York City area, or the American South. And while it is obvious that places like Harlem, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi were closest to the author's heart, it is readily apparent that Langston Hughes was able to recognize the mystery and beauty of places unfamiliar to those blacks who may have read his poetry. There is a reverence for the world in his writings that surfaces in such pieces as "Moonlight Night: Carmel" and "Seascape," on pages 53 and 54, respectively. Of special interest to the reader should be the section "Magnolia Flowers" beginning on page 155. Although the poems in this section deal primarily with the mistreatment of blacks in the American South,

there is nevertheless a great deal of affection in the poems included here. "Daybreak in Alabama" is one example of the affection for the South which Hughes and likely many other African-Americans felt and still feel. The speaker talks lovingly of the Alabama landscape with its tall trees, pine needles, and scent of red clay after the rain. In direct contrast to "Daybreak in Alabama" stands "The South" on page 173. The tone of this completely contradicts the sentiment of the earlier piece: "Passionate, cruel, / Honey-lipped, syphlitic— / That is the South. / And I, who am black, would love her / But she spits in my face." These two poems combined serve as an effective and poignant representation of the inner conflict many American blacks experienced at that time. On one hand, the South is perceived as home, as familiar and welcoming. Conversely, the South is also perceived as merciless, "Beast-strong, / Idiot-brained" (173). These two portrayals exhibit a current of feeling which could register as positive or negative, given an individuals chosen point of focus.

Language and Meaning

For the most part, Hughes' poems are written using standard English. However, there are a number of poems which are written in black vernacular. Most especially, ts the case with the majority of selections in "Feet of Jesus" which center around church and religion, specifically Christianity. For example, in "Sinner," the speaker admits to being "Po' an' black / An' humble an lonesome / An' a sinner in yo' sight." The tendency in speech to omit the ending letters of words like and is a mark of a kind of black American home speak. In other words, it marks the difference between language used in the African-American home and that used in society or around whites. In other selections found in the same section, the home speak is not utilized. The short verse "Prayer" is an example of standard English being used in a religious or spiritual context.

Also of note is the author's use of French language words such as the title "Danse Africaine" ("African Dance") and "Ennui" ("Boredom"). One possible explanation for Hughes using French titles could simply be that he preferred the way his titles sounded in French. Also, French is a first language for many blacks in Africa as a result of colonization. The use of terms outside of English could signal the author's solidarity with blacks in other countries. Additionally, at the time the poems were written, quite a few African-American artists and intellectuals were living in France as ex-patriots. in France, such creative personalities as singer/dancer/actress Josephine Baker and writer James Baldwin enjoyed greater freedom, acceptance, and hospitality than they had in the United States. Also, French is the quintessential language of love, and certainly in the case of "Danse Africaine," there is passion in the speaker's voice. In the case of "Ennui," however, the use of such a term belies a certain amount of cultural, intellectual, and socio-economic distance between Hughes and his potential black readership. A word like "ennui" is most often used by middle and upper-class non-native French speakers to describe a state of melancholy or depression. What is ironic about the author's use of the word is that it is the title of a very short piece about being poor, something to which many of Langston Hughes' readers, black or white, could relate.

Structure

As a complete body of work, SELECTED POEMS OF LANGSTON HUGHES does not adhere to any one particular structure. Some of the poems are only three or four lines long. On the other hand, "Freedom's Plow" is well over five pages in length and is broken into sections of varying lengths. "Montage of a Dream Deferred" is itself comprised of over 50 "songs" each having to do with the black American experience and that of black people living in Harlem and other urban areas. The great majority of the selections included in this volume are structured in stanzas. Some rhyme and some do not. There are poems, however, which reflect a particular "format" chosen by the author. For instance, "Angels Wings" on page 25 mentions that the wings of an angel are white as snow. The words "white," "as" and "snow" are arranged on the page to resemble snowflakes falling from the sky. Hughes was also particularly fond of the parenthetical statement. In "Havana Dreams," the parenthetical statement is used as a way for the author to interact with (talk to) the audience. The speaker declares: "The dream is a cocktail at Sloppy Joe's—" after which the author answers "(Maybe—nobody knows)." This technique could also have been used as a way to concretize on the page those thoughts which occurred to him as he crafted the poem. The use of italics for emphasis and change of voice is also quite prevalent in this volume.

Quotes

"I am the American heartbreak— / Rock on which Freedom / Stumps its toe—" (Pg. 9)

"Little snail, / Dreaming you go. / Weather and rose / Is all you know." (Pg. 59)

"The wind has blown all the cloud-garments / Off the body of the moon / And now she's naked, / Stark naked." (Pg. 60)

"I will take your heart. / I will take your soul out of your body / As though I were God." (Pg. 62)

"She did not love me, / So I crept away into the night / And the night was black, too." (Pg. 66)

"I would liken you / To a sleep without dreams / Were it not for your songs." (Pg. 67)

"When Susanna Jones wears red / Her face is like an ancient cameo / Turned brown by the ages." (Pg. 68)

"Love is a wild wonder" (Pg. 69)

"The calm, / Cool face of the river / Asked me for a kiss." (Pg. 85)

"[...] Yet you seek, / As if you could keep, / This unbought loveliness of the moon." (Pg. 95)

"Beat the drums of tragedy for me, / and let the white violins whir thin and slow [...]" (Pg. 103)

But blow one blaring trumpet note of sun / To go with me / to the darkness / where I go." (Pg. 103)

"Some pimps wear summer hats / Into late fall [...]" (Pg. 108)

"Oh, men treats women / Just like a pair o' shoes— / You kicks 'em round and / Does 'em like you choose." (Pg. 112)

"The music / From the trumpet at his lips / Is honey / Mixed with liquid fire." (Pg. 115)

"When you turn the corner / And you run into yourself / Then you know that you have turned / All the corners that are left." (Pg. 136)

"Just a pencil and paper, / You don't need not gun nor knife— / A little old letter / Can take a person's life." (Pg. 152)

"A minister preached— / And charged Five / To bless him dead / And praise him alive." (Pg. 198)

"Beige sailors with large noses / Binocular the Atlantic." (Pg. 192)

"Now that he's buried— / God rest his soul— / Reckon there's no charge / For graveyard mold." (Pg. 198)

"I said, Do you love me? / Or am I mistaken? / You're always giving / And never taking." (Pg. 215)

"I do not need my freedom when I'm dead. / I cannot live on tomorrow's bread." (Pg. 285)

Topics for Discussion

Read "Danse Africane" on page 7. Discuss the author's deliberate choice of a French title rather than an English one. What is significant about the phrase "night-veiled girl"? What is the author implying when he states: "And the low beating of the tom-toms / Stirs your blood"? Who is the audience for this poem?

In several of Hughes' poems, the motif of the dream is used. Discuss what the importance of dreams (or wishes) in the context of an African-American writer of the early 20th century. What were the issues facing Langston Hughes and other artists at that time? Use examples from the text to substantiate the points being made.

Re-read the selections in "Lament for Love" (Pps. 123 - 123). What does the author accomplish by writing from the perspective of an African-American woman? What do the poems, as a group, say about the African-American female's experience in relationships with men in the 1920s and 1930s? Use specific textual examples to reinforce and validate your responses.

Compare Hughes' portrayal of women in "Danse Africaine" on page 7 with that found in "Midnight Dancer" on page 129. Both representations emphasize the exotic qualities of a black woman. How do the poems differ in tone, structure and rhythm? Comment on the manner in which the poems deal with a woman's "Africanness." Cite examples from both poems in the analysis.

See "The Negro Mother" on page 288. What characteristics mentioned in this piece differentiate the Negro mother from other mothers? What representation of black femininity does the poem give the reader? Explain what the speaker means in the last two lines of the piece when she says, "For I will be with you till no white brother / Dares keep down the children of the Negro mother."

Determine the speaker and the audience in the poem "High to Low" on page 250. What elements of the speaker's argument can be found in the way in which some whites in America perceive some African-Americans? Make certain to use concrete examples from the text to better illustrate the points being made.

"Montage of a Dream Deferred" mentions several locations in and around Harlem in New York City. Re-examine the poems in this section and determine the "personality" of Harlem. What is the significance of be-bop and jazz in Hughes' portrayal of this section of the city? In what way are the pieces included in "Montage" actually musical pieces themselves? Cite examples from individual poems to prove the argument you are trying to make.