



The Peerian Journal

Open Access | Peer Reviewed

Volume 5, April, 2022.

Website: www.peerianjournal.com

ISSN (E): 2788-0303

Email: editor@peerianjournal.com

The Theme of Racial Discrimination In "I, too" Langston Hughes

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Abstract: Langston Hughes and the basic themes of his poetry. It is important to know about an idea of that period. Theoretical part of the work can be useful for the articles, diploma works in American Literature. The Practical value lies in as a source of preparation for lectures and seminars on American literature classes.

Key words: I, too, brother, suggestion, strength and determination.

"I, Too" was included in Langston Hughes's first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, published in 1926. The poem reflects Hughes's dream that one day segregation will end. According to the poem, when that happens, all men, white and black, will sit together at the same table, sharing equally in the opportunities that the American dream offers.

"I, Too" is a response to nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing." Where Whitman rejoices in a country that offers him all that he wants, Hughes's poem makes clear that the United States does not provide a joyous experience for all its citizens. Hughes's poem is deceptively simple; its straight forward structure and deliberate choice of words suggest strength and determination. Hughes wrote "I, Too" in 1924 while stranded in Genoa, Italy, after his passport and wallet were stolen. Genoa had a busy port and Hughes tried to catch a ride back to the United States as a deckhand, but no ship would take him. After watching several white men easily get rides, Hughes wrote "I, Too" and mailed it to New York, hoping to sell the poem and make some money. There is no record of whether the poem brought Hughes any money, but the poem's theme of inequality reflects the world that Hughes saw around him, a world in which white sailors were free to refuse to serve with a black man, thus stranding him in Italy with no identification or money.

Stanza 1 The first stanza of "I, Too" consists of only one line, in which the speaker asserts that he is also celebrating being an American. The title, with its use of the word *too* suggests that the speaker is replying to another literary work. The emphasis in the line is on this word, since that is the most important word in this four-word line. In fact, "I, Too" is a response to Walt Whitman's 1860 poem, "I Hear America Singing." Whitman's poem celebrates American patriotism. The poet lists a number of different professions, including a carpenter and a mason, all of whom sing about their happiness at being American.

Hughes's response is a reminder that black Americans also form part of this culture. By beginning with the singular personal pronoun, *I*, Hughes quickly establishes that the poet is also the subject of the poem. He also sings of the greatness of the United States just as Whitman's singers of the nineteenth century sang their tribute.

Stanza 2 In the second stanza, the narrator begins by defining himself as a brother, albeit the darker brother who is set apart, segregated from his white brother when company visits. The use of



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the word *brother* is not intended to be read as the literal brother but symbolically, as all men are brothers. All Americans are united as one. The United States welcomes all people to its shores and offers all the opportunity to achieve the American dream. Hughes's poem, however, suggests that not all Americans are given the same opportunity to achieve their dreams. Some—those with dark skin—are cast aside and kept from achieving the dream. Hughes reminds his readers that those people are equal to all others; they are brothers to the white majority.

The second line of stanza 2 refers to more than just being sent to the kitchen to eat. African Americans were victims of Jim Crow laws in the 1920s, when Hughes was a young writer. These laws kept black people separate from white people on public transportation, in restaurants, in theaters, at drinking fountains, and in public bathrooms. Miscegenation laws made it illegal for a black person to marry a white person, and poll taxes and literacy tests kept black Americans from voting. Black children were educated separately from white children. Hughes's reference to being sent to the kitchen when company arrived is intended to represent all of the ways in which blacks and whites were separated in American life during the early twentieth century.

The last three lines of this stanza are a reminder that the darker brothers, who are cast aside, are not defeated. The poet suggests that he uses the time in which he has been segregated to his own advantage. He is able to grow stronger. The second stanza establishes that segregation is still a part of life for many black Americans, but the last lines of the stanza indicate that segregation will not last.

Stanza 3 - This stanza begins with only a word. *Tomorrow* is a word filled with hope that the next day will be better than the current one. The first lines of stanza 3 are a promise that the world will change for black Americans. Someday they will not live in segregation, isolated from the rest of human-kind. Someday, whenever that elusive "tomorrow" occurs, black brothers will not be separated from their white brothers. They will all be at the same table, enjoying the abundance that all Americans experience. This is the promise of the American dream, which will someday be enjoyed by all people, black and white. In the last few lines of stanza 3, the poet issues a warning. There will come a time when no one will cast him aside and when no American will be cast aside because his skin is darker. The poet is issuing a challenge. He is daring anyone who thinks that black people can be cast aside to try and hold him back. He makes clear that when tomorrow arrives and black people are treated as equals, the past cannot then be recalled. Once the dark brother sits at the table, he will not willingly return to the past.

In stanza 4, the narrator reminds readers that there are additional reasons for giving the black American the equality he deserves. Although the narrator suggests that his beauty provides a reason to end segregation, he is not talking solely about the kind of physical beauty that sets him apart from other people. He is talking about the beauty of existence. There is beauty in life, in living. The poet claims that once white people realize that black people are beautiful, they will be ashamed that they denied black people their equality. This is an optimistic view that all people will regret segregation. The speaker is hopeful that all people will see that each human being deserves life and opportunity.

Stanza 5-The final line of this poem parallels the first line, with only a single word change. The poet is an American. Where the opening line claims that the poet joins his white brothers in singing to celebrate America, in the final lines, the speaker states that he *is* America. The speaker, an individual, suggests that he also represents all Americans and American values. This final line is a declaration of equality, a resounding claim to equal opportunity to achieve the American dream.



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Themes. Hughes's poem "I, Too" explores the duality of identity that defined black life in the United States in the 1920s. Black Americans claimed citizenship in a country that denied black citizens the same rights that were provided to white citizens. The poet claims that he is an American and entitled to the same privileges as all other Americans, including the right to eat with Americans of any racial or ethnic background. "I, Too" shows the poet trying to establish his identity through the progress of the poem. In the beginning of the poem, the narrator embraces his right to sing America, the same as all other people who sing to celebrate America. Ironically, his identity as an American grows stronger each time he is cast out of American society. Each time he is excluded, the process reinforces his identity as an American, until he is finally strong enough to demand that he be recognized as an American. By the last line of the poem, the narrator no longer sings of America's greatness; he is America's greatness. He is ready to claim the identity that has been too-long denied him. He is an American.

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