

## Sixty-Two Words to Reveal a History

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~ To read Langston Hughes's poem "I, Too", please visit the following link:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47558/i-too> ~

While Langston Hughes's poem "I, Too" is a brief work, it carries an impressively vast amount of detail and nuance within its eighteen short lines. At first glance, Hughes uses this poem to describe the situation of a black man who seems to work for a white family. The man does whatever is required of him, but the family hides him when other people come to visit. That fact seems to be all there is to know about him, and he dreams of a day when he will join them at the table. Upon closer inspection, however, the structure and mirroring of the poem and Hughes's choice of words all signify that this man is not speaking just for himself. In fact, he is not speaking for people at all. Instead, this man is speaking for the story of black slavery and subjugation itself and how he is looking forward to the day when this downplayed part of American history, so often overlooked, is going to be brought into the light and revealed for all the world to see.

The structure of the poem is the first place that readers encounter this kind of focus, giving few hints where to focus their attention. The poem is broken up into five stanzas, with the first and last each composed of a single line. Those two lines are designed to stand out, with nothing around them to pull the reader's attention away. Instead of creating two distinct thoughts, however, Hughes chooses to mirror the opening stanza with the closing. The poem begins with the line, "I, too, sing America" (line 1), but only one word changes when he closes the poem with "I, too, am America" (line 18). These statements are distinct, reflecting the kind of growth that the speaker wants to see. He begins by saying that he can act like America, as he can sing their song, but it implies that he is not fully accepted by what is traditionally considered "America." In contrast, at the end of the poem, he declares that he truly is America now, whether the dissenters like it or not.

Nonetheless, it is interesting that the man calls himself "America," not simply "American." Hughes wants to make that distinction stand out in these lines by isolating them on the page and by using them to bookend the poem, forcing the reader to consider them more carefully to discover why that choice was made and what makes it so important. When the structure of the poem highlights certain details like the opening and closing lines, the author's choice of words needs great intentionality to make sure that the point is made. When it comes to the distinction between *America* and *American*, Hughes makes his choice masterfully. With a single letter, he changes the meaning of the poem entirely. The easiest way to interpret the poem is to see it as a black man's wanting recognition from a white community, but if Hughes meant for this to be the call of a black man, he would have said that he was American. By choosing to use the term *America* instead, Hughes implies that this speaker represents America itself. The poem becomes a story about an entire nation, an entire legacy, with a single letter.

At the beginning of the poem, the darker brother is sent away when company comes. Hughes wants his readers to associate the imagery of a black man in servitude with America as a whole. The "darker brother" (line 2) of America's legacy is sent away when others come to look, and they only ever see its good side. The speaker longs for a day when he will be at the table, when he will be seen, even if the people trying to keep him hidden are against it. By using phrases like "Nobody'll dare" send him away (line 11) and how they will "be ashamed" to have him there (line 17), the speaker proves that it will not be their choice to let him take a seat. They are trying their best to keep him out of sight, out of mind, but he refuses to be silenced and hidden away. America will be seen for who he truly is.

As this representative character of the darker side of America and its legacy, the speaker is fighting to be known and to be recognized at the table. He wants to be seen "when company comes" (line 10), when the world comes knocking at the gates of history. America has recently been criticized for trying to downplay the enormous impact slavery had on its modern prosperity, and the speaker is starting to see his dream come to pass. In the years when he was rejected, he decided to "laugh, and eat well, and grow strong" (lines 5-7). Now that tomorrow has come, he has been brought to the table in the presence of company. America's history is being made known to the world, and the people who tried to hide that history do not dare to tell it to "[e]at in the kitchen" (line 13), because company will not stand for it. The world has decided to make known the story of the black community; it cannot be covered back up and hidden away. As the speaker says, "They'll see how beautiful I am, and be ashamed" (lines 16-17), because they know what they did to him, how they tried to hide him away when company came, and now they know how incredible he is to everyone else. By finally achieving that first interaction, America has been able to reveal the whole story. Moreover, those who could not speak out have been given the voice that they need to advocate for the change that they still need today.

Hughes wrote this poem to express his desire to see black history uncovered in America. It is America's secret past, its "darker brother" (line 2), as the speaker puts it. Hughes looked forward to the day when it would be brought into the light. He wrote this poem in 1926, almost twenty years before the Civil Rights Movement even started. It was, however, the same year that Negro History Week was announced and black history began to receive attention in schools. Hughes was right on the brink in America's understanding of its own history, and this poem reflects that very turning point. The speaker is ready to step out of the kitchen to join the table. Therefore, his story is just as important to America's legacy as any other.

Hughes's choice of words and imagery create this vision of a black worker in a white home that points the reader toward the greater narrative that he is forming, pointing to the oppression of the people and their right to be heard. The structure of the poem, brief as it is, invites closer attention to every detail. The bookend stanzas sum up the entirety of his message in four words: "I, too, am America" (line 18). I, too, deserve the recognition freely given to everyone else. I, too, have the right to tell my story. I, too, deserve a seat at the table, and I will not let you take that away from me. All of it is implied in one sentence. Moreover, in only sixty-two words, Langston Hughes has written a masterpiece that captures the essence of what it means to be truly known and seen.

### Work Cited

Hughes, Langston. "I, Too." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature: 1865 to the Present*, edited by Robert S. Levine, 9th ed., Norton, 2017, p. 1038.



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