

## Structural Perspective on Selected Social Protest Poems by Hughes: A Formalist Reading

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### Abstract

This study examines the artistic nature of three of Langston Hughes's social protest poems: "Beaumont to Detroit: 1943", "Harlem" and "I, Too". Oppression, injustice, hypocrisy and resistance are issues in every human society around the world - from the developed world to the underdeveloped world. For instance, in Africa, the recovery from colonization and the upsurge of neocolonialism have set social protest as a necessity in all institutions. The academia has had its own constant question about the subject of protest, which in the case of Langston Hughes includes putting injustice, oppression, hypocrisy and resistance into conversation. The study considers the linguistic, literary and structural representation of these themes. I found that the pronouns, nouns and verbs are the dominant linguistic representations of these subjects. Whereas the nouns label the characters and places in the text, the pronouns classify these characters in the texts into two groups – the oppressor and the oppressed. These are demonstrated through the use of tropes such as historical allusions, metaphors, similes and others. The verbs set these characters and the setting in the world of the text into action. There are two generic actions throughout all the three poems. These are physical and mental actions. The oppressors enact the majority of physical actions verbs with the oppressed enacting much of the mental verbs and few of the physical action verbs. In addition, the verbs frame the time of occurrences of these actions in the past, present and future time - creating a systemic wheel of oppression, injustice, hypocrisy, and resistance. It is from this period that the themes discussed have current relevance.

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### Résumé

Cette étude est une analyse formaliste de certains poèmes de protestation de l'auteur noir américain Langston Hughes. Nous nous intéressons particulièrement à trois poèmes : « Beaumont to Detroit : 1943 », « Harlem » et « I, Too ». L'oppression, l'injustice, l'hypocrisie et la résistance sont des faits et phénomènes présents dans toute société humaine, qu'elle soit développée ou non. En Afrique par exemple, le passage de la colonisation à l'indépendance ou au néocolonialisme a suscité des protestations. La société noire américaine connut un parcours similaire et les écrivains et universitaires se penchent beaucoup sur les thèmes, sujets ou événements qui justifient ces protestations ou révoltes. Cette étude examine à la lumière de la linguistique, comment Langston Hughes expose et manipule ces thèmes liés à la révolte, dans ces trois poèmes ci-dessus mentionnés. Nous analysons comment d'une manière linguistique, littéraire et structurelle, ces thèmes de protestation sont utilisés par le poète. L'étude nous a permis de découvrir que les pronoms, les noms et les verbes sont les principaux éléments linguistiques que le poète utilise pour faire passer son message. Pendant que les noms sont associés aux personnages et lieux, les pronoms sont utilisés pour classer les personnages en "opresseurs" et "opprimés". Tout ceci contribue à créer les tropes suivants : métaphores, analogies, allusions historiques, et bien d'autres représentations. Les verbes mettent les personnages en mouvement, et toute la scène de l'œuvre littéraire elle-même est ainsi mise en mouvement à travers l'usage des verbes. La plupart des verbes d'action sont utilisés en relation avec les oppresseurs, tandis que les victimes sont liées à très peu de verbes d'action et beaucoup de verbes passifs, plutôt. Ceci traduit un aspect mental de subissement ou une mentalité de victime. En plus, l'usage des verbes, permet au lecteur de découvrir le temps, à savoir le passé, le présent et le futur. Ceci crée à son tour un mécanisme d'oppression, d'injustice, d'hypocrisie et de résistance. C'est de cette époque ainsi créée que découle le sens et l'importance des thèmes dont traite la présente étude. Notre travail est guidé par l'approche formaliste.

**Mots-clés :** Forme, formalisme, Harlem Renaissance, Hughes, poèmes de protestation sociale.

## Introduction

It is worth mentioning that Harlem Renaissance appears somehow polysemic as a result of the national scope of the cultural phenomenon it is attached to, and that tends to limit its identification with only one district in New York City. It is also important to state from the onset that we are aware of the fact that the term “Negro” is not accepted in American society since the 1960s. The term Harlem Renaissance has remained a landmark in literary and cultural studies because most schools and students agree that the 1920s showcased a decade of extra-ordinary creativity in the arts for Afro-Americans and that much of that creativity found its ground in the activities of African Americans living in New York City, particularly Harlem district. James Weldon Johnson calls it “the greatest Negro city in the world” (Johnson 1). These extra-ordinary creativities in art and literature include mainly poetry, fiction, drama, essays, music, dance, painting and sculpture. One pivotal example is the works of the well-known poet Langston Hughes. African Americans therefore worked not only with a new sense of confidence and purpose but also with a sense of achievement never experienced before by so many black artists in the long and complicated history of the African descendants in North America. This bold expression of artistic practice of a high quality primarily responded to Blacks’ social conditions, and it represented the affirmation of their dignity and humanity regarding poverty and racism. The cultural renaissance of African Americans throughout the whole world, and especially against their oppressors, White Americans, constitutes an attempt made to alleviate the harsh treatment reserved to Blacks in America. In this perspective, Langston Hughes as the leading voice in the Harlem renaissance says:

we younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America-this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of

American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American (Hughes 3-1).

As an essayist and dramatist, Hughes dedicated his column in the news magazine named *Chicago Defender* to address in Harlem societal issues like Jim Crow laws, injustice and many others. Hughes geared all his artistic works towards the redefinition of the Black identity as a step in achieving social justice. His travels to Mexico, the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, Central Asia and the Far East motivated him in the pursuit of his vocation. After Hughes's visits to Nigeria, he admitted that he was greatly inspired to want to write more about the African people (*Harlem Renaissance* 929). The last decades of Langston Hughes's life were spent traveling and giving lectures, which motivated the young generation of writers to produce works that reflect their culture and society (the Negro experience). This, I believe serves as the healing process for once colonized or enslaved people. In this way, the healing transpires through the works he produced. The significant role of these works enables the selection of relevant materials to effect change. These materials in a literary work result in the choice of words, sound effects, structure, tropes and many others.

Prior to the early 1990s, the American academics have tended to divide Hughes's verse into two groups: black "folk" poetry, which generally covers the blues poems, and "social protest" or "revolutionary" verse. Hughes's early poetry written in the 1930s on racial topics was usually embraced as culturally "authentic" in the USA. His works have been translated from English to French, German, Italian, Hebrew, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish, Uzbek, and Yiddish. Hughes recognizes blues as a truly great folk art in itself, and a worthy resource for writers of the Harlem Renaissance and beyond (Davidas 262; Tracy 73). Consequently, the jazz and blues techniques in the poetry of Hughes prompt the audience to become active listeners. (Blain et. al. 2) add the juxtaposition of secularism and religion where they indicate that with no one to stop the police violence against blacks here on earth, they naturally look to heaven for divine assistance but are once again let down. They posit that the African Americans should stop looking to the church and to God to solve their problems and instead find their own creative solutions to fight the persistence of white racism. Miller (109) genders the study by making a case for women. He construes the presentation of matriarchal archetypes. These studies reviewed analyze Hughes' works by taking into consideration the biographical, intellectual

and historical context. These lenses affect the beauty of arts because art is not examined on its own terms and for its own sake. There appears to be a dearth of literature that analyzes Hughes' social protest poems on its own terms and for their own sake – this makes it very necessary for these poems to be reread in “their individualistic” form. This study will examine three of Hughes's social protest poems namely: “Beaumont to Detroit: 1943”, “Harlem” and “I, too” through the formalistic sense to construct how form creates meaning outside biological, intellectual, and historical context.

### Theoretical Framework

Formalism is born out of a ‘defiant challenge’ of the method of literary analysis that solely focused on the cultural, social and political message and not the formal or external features in the early twentieth century (Erich 19). The Moscow linguistic circle and the society for the study of poetic language (OPOJAZ), the founders of modern literary criticism established formalism. This approach aimed to settle the methodical confusion that prevailed in traditional literary studies (Steiner 627). The forerunners of formalism conceptualized it into four metaphors machine, organism, system and linguistic formalism. The crust of these metaphors denotes ‘a return to craftsmanship’ (Shklovsky 327). In other words, a return to how the language units construct the subject matter of a literary work independent of the ‘author or reader’s psyche’ (Erich 628). The analysis of a work’s constituent parts or form, which constitute the subject matter, is the occupation of the formalism theory. These constituent parts include imagery, syntax, rhyme scheme, paradox and many others. Each of the compositional feature possesses peculiar properties that can be analyzed like in any science (Bressler 49).

In this case, formalists believe that the form of a work of literature is inherently a part of its content and that the attempt to separate the two is fallacious. The social protest poems of Hughes are classical examples of literary works, which covertly share a correlation between its form and content. The form is the specific element that makes a literary artwork real art, in another sense, the form is the key to understanding a text. The form need not be geometric, physical or otherwise perceptible to the eye, and indeed often it is not but it is always present (Guerin et. al 97). This formalist reading of Hughes’ social protest poems will analyze the basic

components of the selected poems such as the parts of speech (verbs, pronouns, adverbs, adjectives, nouns etc.) and the tropes (metaphors, allusions, alliterations) as well as its aesthetics.

## Analysis and Discussion

### 1. “Beaumont to Detroit: 1943”

#### • Pronouns

The poem contains the following pronouns, and they happen to be the highest occurring ones: “I”, “he”, “we”, “your”, “me”, with “you”. Pronouns mostly form the peopling in “Beaumont to Detroit: 1943”. These pronouns together establish two groups of people that is “you”, “your”, “he” and “I”, “we”, “me”. These can be seen in the following lines of the poem: “What you done done” (stanza 1 line 2), “You tell me that hitler” (stanza 2 line 1), “You tell me that Mussolini” (stanza 4 line 1), and “You jim crowed me” (stanza 6 line 1). The pronoun “you” is used in the subjective case or is the doer of the actions stated above. Likewise, the possessive pronoun “your” in “Now your policemen / Let your mobs run free” (stanza 2 line 1 and 2) qualifies “policemen” and “mobs”. This means that both the “policemen” and the “mob” are owned by the oppressors. This paints an anarchist society where the law enforcer is the protector of the violence, and the speaker is the victim of this anarchy.

Let us consider what the speaker says in stanza 7 line 1: “Yet you say we’re fighting for democracy”. The presence of the first-person plural “we” heightens the extent to which the oppressor’s concern and claims about democracy are hypocritical. The use of “we” may seem as an inclusion of both groups in the fight for democracy, a case, which is ironical. In the example “I guess he took lessons” (stanza 3 line 3) and “That he had his start” (stanza 4 line 4), the choice of metaphors (hitler and mussolini) heightens the brutish nature of the oppressor.

The pronouns “I, me, we” form the second group in the poem to which the persona and speaker belong. Particularly, the pronoun “me” is recorded many times throughout the poem. In fact, the pronoun “me”, syntactically, occupies the objective case in an English sentence and acts as the recipient of an action performed by the subject. This strongly indicates the objectification of the persona and his community by the oppressors. For instance, “You tell me that hitler” (stanza 3 line 1), “You tell me that Mussolini” (stanza 4 line 1), and “You jim crowed me” (stanza

6 line 1). The speaker takes on the subjective function in the lines quoted below to make clear and highlight the irony and underlying hypocritical disposition of the addressee. He says for instance “I ask you this question / cause I want to know” (stanza 8 line 1) and “I guess he took lessons” (stanza 3 line 3). Although the speaker assumes a subjective position, he does that personally to reveal the hypocrisy of the oppressor.

To sum up, the pronouns employed in the poem prove Gayatri Spivak’s concept of *othering*—the situation where a group of people believe themselves to be superior and perceive the other group to be inferior. In this case, the two groups of people in the poem are represented by the pronouns, “you”, he, your, and we (superior) “me” and “I” (inferior group). The subjective and objective case pronouns give an exposition on the society the persona lives in. A society consisting of two classes of people, the objective pronouns represent the oppressed because of the grammatical function of elements in the objective case. Elements in the objective case are the recipients of the action of the subject - the subjective pronouns are the doers of the oppressive acts.

#### • Nouns

Nouns are words that name things. These are people, places, ideas, animals, institutions and many others. “Beaumont to Detroit: 1943” records fifteen (15) nouns, which are “America”, “thing”, “riots”, “policemen”, “mobs”, “hitler”, “man”, “ku klux klan”, “mussolini”, “heart”, “Beaumont”, “Negroes”, “treatment”, “hour”, “question”. The names of places that are “America”, “Detroit” and “Beaumont” give the subject matter a setting: “Beaumont” and “Detroit” are the micro setting where America is the macro setting. Again, the names of people in the poem foreground the argument made by the pronouns as discussed earlier; where the pronouns construct two groups of people, the oppressed represented by the (objective pronouns) and the oppressor (subjective pronouns). The nouns name the oppressors, which are “policemen”, “mobs”, “hitler”, “man”, “mussolini”, “ku klux klan”. The “ku klux klan”, “hitler” and “mussolini” are historical figures and groups remembered for the horror and terror they rained on humanity.

Actually, the actions in / of the American society are made equal to Hitler and Mussolini’s terror on humanity. All three in history have massacred hundreds and thousands of innocent people. Likewise, the “mobs” share in the brutality of these three. The presence of “policemen”



in the group of oppressors demonstrates the intentionally systemic and constitutionally justified nature of the oppression. The oppressed groups are the “Negroes”. The noun “question”, “hour” and “thing” name the reaction of the oppressed Negroes to the oppressive acts. Where “riots” and “treatment” name the circumstances of oppression. The names of the oppressors heighten the intensity of the oppression. Their action is one of resistance, courage and perseverance in the midst of systemic oppression. The nouns in the poem construe the themes of oppression, injustice, racism and resistance. Furthermore, the nouns “hitler” and “mussolini” create the trope, historical allusion and metaphor. Both tropes simplify complex phenomena by relating it to other elements or phenomena. The Mussolini and Hitler - instigated brutality simplifies the brutality meted out on the African American.

- **Verbs**

Verbs that denote physical actions are known as the material process (Thompson 95). These material processes include physical actions like throwing, cooking etc. In the case of the poem, these underlined verbs, “Mussolini do”, “the riots come”, “mobs run”, “Negroes get”, “You jim crowed”, “jim crowing” are the physical actions. The verb “jim crowing” and “jim crowed” is originally a law (noun). The Jim Crow law was enacted in post slavery America to segregate the Blacks from the White. This segregation in detail includes all forms of injustice, principally the denial of quality health care, education, nutrition, security, housing, transportation, political rights and many others. The switching of category from noun to verb foregrounds the atrocity associated with Jim Crow into a continual action. All the material processes or physical actions listed above are directed at the Negroes as realized with the verb underlined, “Negroes get”.

Secondly, whereas there is systemic oppression, the persona creates an image, which is contrary to the injustice of the day. The verbs underlined in the following “we are fighting”, democracy include, Why don’t, You tell (×2), You say, Hitler is, Mussolini got, he had, Hitler rose, he took are instances of hypocrisy. The physical actions “are fighting” (for democracy) and “include” (the Negroes) are in sharp contrast with the systemic oppression of the day. The government of the day stands for democracy as evident in its criticism of the actions of Hitler and Mussolini with the verbs “You tell” (×2), “hitler is”, “mussolini got”, “he had”, “You



say,” but one has the impression that the actions of the government (if they are genuinely against exploitation of African Americans) are vile compared to Hitler and Mussolini and their monstrous ferocity. The verbs underlined as follows “he took”, “Hitler rose” establish the Ku Klux Klan as the originator of Hitler and Mussolini’s brutish actions.

The theme of resistance construed by the verbs reveals the reaction of the oppressed to the brutality and injustice meted out to them. Whereas some verbs denote actions in the physical world as discussed earlier, others describe the actions that go on in the internal world of the mind (Thompson 97). This category of verbs is labelled by Thompson as “the mental process”. The mental process could be sub-categorized into perceptive (seeing, hearing); emotive or reactive (processes of feeling); cognitive (processes of deciding, knowing, understanding) and desiderative (wanting). The oppressed are resisting oppression both mentally and physically. In detail, the first two underlined verbs in the sentence, “I ask you this question / Cause I want to know / How long I got to fight BOTH HITLER – AND JIM CROW” are cognitive verbs. The mental process of wanting and knowing resists injustice and oppression by pricking the consciousness of the oppressor. In “How long I got to fight”, the physical action historicizes the duration of resistance.

Verbs are also lexical items that indicate ‘the time of events’ (Harper and Charniak 3). In the poem, the verbs are the actions and state of the characters and the time these actions occur. The event in the poem spans three periods, represented by the simple past, simple present, and present continuous. Events that occurred in the past (the past) include “got”, “done”, “Jim Crowed”, “rose”, “took” and “had”. Events that occur currently (the present) are “drift”, “come”, “get”, “say”, “run” “free”, “reckon”, “do not”, “tell”, “is”, “guess”, “don’t”, “tell”, “are”, “ask”, “tell”, “are”, “ask”, “do” and “want”. Events still in progress (present progressive) include, “are fighting”, “Jim crowing.” The use of the past tense form of the verbs in the poem historicizes the atrocities and injustices done to the oppressed. It exposes the atrocious acts “done” to the Negro in the past. That the world had experienced.

In addition, the present progressive indicates an ongoing action or an event that is happening the moment an utterance is being made. The present and present progressive verbs demonstrate a Janus-faced society

where Blacks undergo violence from slavery, jim crow, racism to other forms of social injustice.

- **Adverbs**

The poet uses adverbs like “now”, “right now” and “still” which do qualify and strengthen the proposition made by the verbs. They appear as follows: “Now your policemen” (stanza 2 line 1), “Right now, this very hour” (stanza 6 line 4), and “And you’re STILL jim crowing me” (stanza 6 line 3). These adverbs foreground the continuation of the oppression though slavery and jim crow had formally ended. In sum, the capitalization of “STILL” in the stanza 6 line 3 amplifies the persistence of oppression.

- **Language choice**

The use of Ebonics foregrounds and contextualizes the origin of the speaker and persona. Known as a means of communication, language stands as a medium through which a group of people can be represented or identified in a text. Therefore, the use of the African American expression such as “Looky here America / What you done-done, cause, mus-a been” strongly reveals the author’s background. Though the poem addresses a group of non-Ebonics speakers, these expressions largely portray the speaker’s pride in his black identity and tongue. This represents an attempt to humanize the African race that was mostly dehumanized.

- **Tropes**

First, the poem is an apostrophe. An apostrophe is a figure of speech, which addresses an absent person as if s/he was present at the time of the utterance and capable of understanding or responding. The poem addresses an absent listener, America. The use of an apostrophe shows the importance of the subject of discussion. He achieves this by backgrounding the speaker and foregrounding the message in order to present an undiluted message to the addressee who is absent from the speaker’s current scene. This directs the reader’s attention to something other than the person speaking. Literary artists employ this device when they want to direct the reader’s attention to something other than the person speaking.

Second, the poet makes use of allusion, which means “referring” mostly to a famous person, historical event or figures, place, work of art to create a connection between the entity being described and the referent. Instances of allusion in “Beaumont to Detroit: 1943” are “ku klux klan”, “mussolini”, “hitler”, and “jim crow”. A group founded by some White

Americans against the African Americans immediately after the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, the “ku klux klan” used physical assault and perpetrated violence against politically active Blacks and their allies in the Southern United State in the late 1860s. During this barbarous period, many African American leaders and voters were intimidated and violated. By alluding to Mussolini and Hitler, the poet sets the background of his poem against barbarism as practiced by these two dreadful figures of history. Equally, the “Jim Crow law” legalized segregation and injustice against the Afro-Americans. This led to the hanging, burning, dismembering of Afro-Americans for as small a cause as reckless eyeballing and wolf whistling. These various allusions stress the understanding of Hughes’ poetic target. He would like to decry the black man’s predicament in the United States of the time.

Third, irony helps the poet to convey his timeless message. An irony is an utterance that expresses a meaning, which is different from the literal meaning. Examples of irony appear in the following lines: “You tell me that hitler / Is mighty bad man” (stanza 3 line 1-2), and “Yet you say we’re fighting / For democracy” (stanza 4 line 1-2). These ironic expressions and mostly the latter demonstrate that the oppressor is pictured as being pretentious when it comes to fighting for democracy for both Black and White America. These instances create also verbal irony, where the oppressor’s words do not correspond with their deeds and intentions. Even though America always claims to be a democratic nation, this claim is just a bogus one void of truth. In detail, irony reveals the oppressors’ hypocritical and dangerous attitude toward the Negroes in the world of the text.

The fourth device that I want to discuss is the rhetorical question. This form of question demands no answer but it rather appeals to the reader’s conscience. It can also be used to create humor. The stanza 7 line 3-4 both appeal to the conscience. The question above compels the American society to re-conceptualize democracy, humanity and barbarism. In the light of American society, this rhetorical question presents a picture of a society that cultivates injustice but preaches democracy to the world. The role of the rhetorical question in this poem could be likened to an extract in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* a famous speech given by a character, Shylock, who is trying to fight against the anti-Semitism he faces as a Jew. He says: “I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?

Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affection, passion? Fed with the same food, hurt with the weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as Christian is? If you prick us do, we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?” (Shakespeare 302).

Shylock asks this question to understand why the Jews are treated so cruelly. Comparatively with the poem being analyzed, the speaker employs the rhetorical question to prick the conscience of the oppressor to understand that the African is a human being, who eats, feels, cries, bleeds, laughs, dies as any other human. This question is to provoke the thought of the American society to rethink humanity beyond skin color and do the appropriate thing.

Lastly, the poet's esthetics mainly focuses on capitalization. The upper case in stanza 6 and 8 “STILL”, “BOTH HITLER”, and JIM CROW cannot escape the reader's attention. This stands as the author's emphasis on the subject matter of the poem, the persistence of injustice, namely police brutalities, imprisonment, unlawful death sentence, and killings. These highlighted words show all these pathologies in the American society. The fact that the poet writes the names of historical figures, “hitler” and “mussolini”, using lower case in the initials highlights the poet's angst for their deeds that they probably learned from mainstream America. Else, the poet's stanzas take the form of run-on lines, which largely represents the continuity of injustice against Blacks and the need for unity to fight against the oppression.

## 2. “Harlem”

The title of the poem sets the context for the poem. Harlem is home for Afro-American heritage, which entails music, art, literature, and movies to mention a few. During the great migration, rural Afro-Americans migrated to the Northern cities to better their circumstances (*Great Migration* 759). The hardship and abuse they endured in the south propelled them to seek a better future in the North where they could benefit from economic prosperity and freedom. By migrating to the North, they can leave persecution and Jim Crow laws behind. This migration sowed the seed for what would come to be known as the Harlem renaissance. This dream flourished in the 1920s as a step to humanize black culture and identity through music, literature, and

painting. The poem clearly expresses the subject under discussion: “What happens to a dream deferred?” This rhetorical question establishes an unrealized dream or a dream deferred. Beginning with verbs, this analysis will examine how the various aspects of the poem drive home the subject matter.

- **Verbs**

The verbs in the poem include “stink”, “fester”, “run”, “explode”, “sags”, “dry up”, “crust” and “sugar”. These verbs conceptualize the presence of an uncontrollable external force on the item under discussion. They describe actions that generally take place because of microorganisms (stink, fester, run), temperature (dry up, crust, sugar), internal and external pressure (explode, sags). In the context of this poem, it is an indication that an uncontrollable social force can delay a dream.

- **Coordinators**

A coordinating conjunction joins linguistic elements of equal rank. The coordinators “and”, “or” equalize the destructive power of all the structures it coordinates. These coordinators give the poem an emotional “over tone”, a tone that assures the Negro of the inability of anything physical to destroy the deferred dream.

- **Tropes**

Firstly, the poem comprises of seven sentences; but six of them are interrogations and one is a declarative sentence. The number of rhetorical questions demonstrates the poet’s intentional emphasis on the recurring problem experienced in Harlem. Let us consider these rhetorical questions:

What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore... and then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over-- like syrupy sweet?  
Or does it explode?

These questions emphasize the desperation of the victims due to the constant evil they witness. The poet’s intention with these interrogations does not very much focus on any direct answer but it is a way of stressing the persistence of the issue. Many Blacks have expected their absolute freedom and their emancipation in vain, and mainstream America continues to endanger the lives of the miserable people. This poem sheds light on the despair of the victimized people.

Moreover, the speaker uses simile repetitively in the poem. Simile is a process of enhancing or clarifying the meaning of a subject or item by relating its characteristics to entities or activities in the addressee's immediate environment, *as* or *like* links these two items. In this way, a deferred dream is compared to five perishable things. These appear as follows:

Does it dry up **like a raisin in the sun?**  
Or fester **like a sore**  
Does it stink **like rotten meat?**  
Our crust and sugar over **like a syrupy sweet?**  
Maybe it just sags **like a heavy load**

The referents underlined in the above extracts constitute things that can be easily seen in almost every environment. In addition, these referents represent the African Americans' discouraging experience in the United States. *A Raisin in the Sun* denotatively creates the picture of the plantation or farming experience during the time of slavery – the drying of harvested grapes. Referents in similes enable readers to get into the speaker's milieu or background because 'a piece of literary work is a projection of its writer's background and society' (Angmor 1). The Negro has a great familiarity with "sores". Sores translate lashes, skinning, raping and other bodily wounds sustained on the plantation. We can also mention brutalities done to the slaves by the slave masters and holders, the police and mobs – for instance, hanging and dismembering, lynching, burning and many others. After lynching the helpless people, the bodies are therefore left to decay and that fuels the speaker's choice of *rotten meat*. Again, a *syrupy sweet* alludes to domestic slavery. I precisely mean slaves taken as domestic slaves - baking and cooking for the master's household. In addition, a *heavy load* foregrounds the transportation of cotton and other farm produce from the farm to the storage house or the conveying of a slave master's belongings from one place to another. Referring to these experiences deepens the understanding of the speaker's message. The poem gives "dream" a concrete attribute in order to enhance its visibility to the addressee. Likewise, Harlem becoming the beacon of hope to every African American, so *Harlem* puts the injustice and unequal access to opportunities in conversation with perseverance and hopelessness.

### 3. “I, Too”

- **Pronouns**

The personal pronouns “I”, “me” and “they” in the poem constitutes two groups of persons. The persona is represented by “I” and “me” and the subject of discussion “they”. The pronoun “they” (plural) indicates the majority whereas “I” (singular) constitutes the minority. The persona is a member of the minority group. As a result, the persona speaks both on his and his folk’s behalf. He offers words of encouragement to his folks in the midst of oppression and injustice.

- **Verbs**

The verbs in the poem represent only two periods – the present and the future. For simple present, we have first, the state of being verb, “am” (x3), “be ashamed” and action verbs like “sing”, “send”, “comes” (x2), “laugh”, “eat” (x2), “grow”, “say”. For the future time, there are “will be”, “will dare”, and “will see”. The state of being verbs construct the current state of the persona. The speaker says, “I am the darker brother” making explicit his present state. The adjective “darker” could connote a villain or an antagonist in the society that has to be annihilated and a physical description of the persona’s skin - identifying the Negro.

Furthermore, in stanza 4 line 2, the speaker says, “They’ll see how beautiful I am”. The underlined verbs create a mental picture of the persona’s hope for better conditions in the future, a condition that will reveal his beauty. In the last stanza, the persona claims their Identity as they confidently and boldly declare, “I, too am America”. This creates encouragement and perseverance that is an awakening to the persona. This is revealed through the poet’s choice of verbs. “They” is predicated by send, “come” (2), “be ashamed” and “say” while “I” is predicated by “sing”, “laugh”, “eat” (2) and “grow”. The verbs predicating “they” carry a commanding tone thereby giving orders to the oppressed. Nevertheless, the verbs predicating “I” possess a sense of development and growth. “To sing” and “to laugh” ensure a psychological relief to the persona whilst “to eat” and “to grow” corroborate with the speaker’s physical growth. First, the verb “to sing” resonates with Maya Angelou’s poem, “Caged Bird” where the speaker portrays a caged bird who though held in bondage, “opens his throat to sing”. Actually, “the caged bird sings of freedom”. Secondly, considering Frederick Douglas’ *My Bondage and My Freedom*, singing is one of the common activities of relief practiced by the



enslaved Africans in America to unburden their painful hearts. Again, singing represents a form of healing, while eating and growing stand for a futuristic step towards which comes with equipping oneself through education, training, and politics in order to persevere and rise above oppression.

Lastly the future tense reflected by “will be”, “will dare” and “will see,” resolves the present action. “Will be,” describes the speaker’s expectation of a glorious future whereas “will dare,” indicates the oppressor’s powerlessness. In addition, the presence of “will see” portrays the oppressor as a witness to the coming future of the oppressed. Actually, the poet’s aesthetics emphasizes the issue of Blackness. “I, too” is organized in five stanzas, with each stanza being one, six, seven, three, one lines respectively. These five stanzas discuss the “black experience” in America. I think therefore that the number of stanzas corresponding to the number of letters in the words “b-l-a-c-k” and “N-e-g-r-o”. This stylistic arrangement of the poem is not for granted. The poem stresses the Negro’s predicament and resistance.

- **Tropes**

Metaphor is one of the main figures of speech used in the poem. Nietzsche as cited in (Miall 51) starts that a metaphor has a central role to play in the way we make sense of the world. It helps us to express ourselves more forcefully and more colorfully by comparing the subject with items in a speaker’s immediate vicinity. For Miall has it that a metaphor is not an alternative way of expressing common sense but a common way of achieving new sense (Miall 51). These metaphors are literally false yet clearly there is some sense in which they are not only “not false”, but also can provide very valuable insights. On the surface level, the presence of the darker brother at the table represents the falsehood of metaphor. It denotatively appears false but connotatively true. We are able to start with a decidedly limited or restricted set of verbal resources and extend them further, and reshape and refine them to cope with the ever more complicated world (ibid). The speaker draws on the elements familiar to the persona that is domestic slavery. The “company” represents the unexpected incidence that requires justice to take its right course but not in favor of the oppressor.

Connotatively, the verb “send” informs readers of the intention of the oppressor to prevent the persona from enjoying all rights and

privileges. In this case, the rights and privileges to be enjoyed by Afro-Americans are only determined by White America. This represents a metaphor for segregation (Jim Crow), injustice with its underlying brutalities. The “table” is a metaphor for visibility and a “share of the national cake” and “the kitchen” means “invisibility, slavery and toil for the master to enjoy.” The contrastive response of the persona to the experiences of the Afro-American is one of an unbroken spirit. He takes pleasure and gathers strength in the moment of solitude.

### Conclusion

Pronouns, nouns and verbs are the major content structures employed to construct the subject matter of protest. Traditionally, pronouns and nouns name the animate and inanimate entities. Those animate nouns constitute the characters in the world of the poem. The analysis exposed two groups of people, with most of the subjective pronouns representing the oppressor and the objective pronouns, the oppressed. In addition, the names of places construe the setting of the story or the world of the people named in the world of the text. The nouns label these oppressive and oppressed groups. Whereas the subject of discussion is set in America, its subject is relevant to all minority groups in other parts of the world who are oppressed; this includes the poor, women, the disabled and many others. Formalistic approach opens up a text to multiple associations.

The verb is the actions enacted by the pronouns and nouns. These actions are mostly physical actions i.e. “run”, “come”, “get”, “eat”, “sugar”, and mental actions like “know”, “want” etc. The subject of protest was realized through the theme of oppression and social injustice, the hypocrisy of the American society, racial discrimination, unending brutality, the silencing of the oppressed, perseverance and growth in the face of injustice, pride in the black identity, and growth in the face of oppression. The oppressors are associated much with the physical action verbs than with the cognitive action; this is a clear manifestation of oppression. On the other hand, the oppressed group enacts much of the cognitive action and less of the physical action. The physical actions they indulge in are, “ask”, “eat”, “grow”, “are fighting” and many others which are defensive or resistive actions.

Lastly, tropes like allusions, metaphors, similes, and ironies are of paramount importance too. Simply put, a poem like any other work of art has within itself the structure and all the needed elements to create beauty and construct a message through these macroscopic and microscopic elements. With this, the beauty of poetry is revealed through its very constituents.

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