

Langston Hughes was a writer who played a big role in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. The Harlem Renaissance was a huge artistic movement that took place in Harlem, New York. Black artists of all kinds (musicians, visual artists, and writers) exploded onto the scene and made a huge cultural impact on the entire country. Hughes wrote poems about his experiences as a black man in America, and these poems became so popular that some of them are still referenced frequently today. In the time he was writing, segregation still existed in half the country (and would still exist until the Civil Rights Act of 1964), intense racial oppression existed in all parts of the country, and black people were kept from voting (despite having the legal right to vote) through extreme methods of voter suppression. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 finally outlawed barriers (predominantly in the southern states) that were put in place to keep black people from voting. Of course, this year we again saw a strong attempt to suppress inner-city voting as people in inner-city locations had to wait in lines as long as ten hours just to cast their ballots.

The central theme that comes up over and over again in Hughes' poems is the reality of a huge divide between what life was like for a white person versus a black person in the 1920s-1960s. In order to really engage with his poems, you have to try to put yourself in his shoes. He wrote for a black audience, but he also wrote in the hopes that white people would read his poems and start to do the work necessary to move toward ending racist institutions in America.

Assignment 13

Answer the following questions with at least a paragraph for each question.

- 1. What is the mother telling the son in "Mother to Son"? How is the staircase different for white people than it is for her?**
- 2. What does Hughes mean when he says "Tomorrow, / I'll be at the table" in "I, Too"? Why do you think this poem was so controversial when it was published in 1925?**
- 3. What is Hughes saying in "Democracy"? Who do you think is telling him to wait? What is the emotional tone of this poem?**
- 4. In "Theme for English B" Hughes writes about how he defines himself. What statement is he trying to make through this poem?**