I, Too

POEM TEXT

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

SUMMARY

I also am part of America.

I am a black member of the American family. They tell me I have to eat alone in the kitchen when they have people over for dinner. But I laugh at their hypocrisy, and eat heartily in order to grow stronger.

In the future, I will sit at the table when they have people over for dinner. No one will dare to tell me that I have to eat alone in the kitchen then.

And anyway, they'll see that I'm beautiful then and they'll feel ashamed of themselves.

I also am American.

THEMES

RACISM AND AMERICAN IDENTITY

"I, Too" is a cry of protest against American racism. Its speaker, a black man, laments the way that he is excluded from American society—even though he is a key part of it. But, the speaker argues, black people have persevered—and will persevere—through the injustices of racism and segregation by developing a vibrant, beautiful, and independent cultural tradition, a cultural tradition so powerful that it will eventually compel white society to recognize black contributions to American life and history.

Throughout the poem, the speaker insists that he is authentically American and that his community has made important contributions to American life. The speaker begins by announcing, "I, too, sing America." This is an allusion to a poem by Walt Whitman, "I Hear America Singing." In that poem, Whitman describes America as a song, which emerges from a diverse chorus of workers, farmers and industrial labors, women and men.

However, Whitman notably does not include black people in his vision of American life. Even though the poem was written in 1855, just five years before the Civil War started, he doesn't mention slavery at all. The speaker objects to Whitman's poem, insisting that black people contribute to the American "song": in other words, that black culture and black labor have been key to creating America.

The poem argues that these contributions have been consciously erased by white people. In the poem's second stanza, the speaker notes that he is forced to "eat in the kitchen / when company comes." This is an extended metaphor for segregation. It describes the way that white people treat black people and black contributions to American culture.

The speaker also suggests that white and black communities are quite intimate with each other. The speaker is "the darker brother"—in other words, he's part of the same family—the American family—as the white people who force him to eat in the kitchen. Despite this intimacy, however, the white members of this metaphorical family force him out of view when other people are around, when they have "company." In other words, the extended metaphor highlights the hypocrisy of white communities: even though white and black people are part of the same American family, white people exclude, neglect, and ignore black contributions to American history and culture.

Despite being treated like a second-class citizen, the speaker responds to injustice by declaring that he will "laugh," "eat well," and "grow strong." In other words, black people respond to

racism and segregation by developing vibrant and independent cultural traditions. These traditions give them strength so that, in the future, white people will no longer be able to ignore their contributions to American culture—"they'll see how beautiful I am," the speaker announces in line 16. Further, as a result of this strength and beauty, white people will no longer be able to exclude the "darker brother" from the table. Segregation itself will break down.

The poem thus argues that racism involves a willful refusal to acknowledge that black people as just as American as anyone else. And it argues that this refusal will eventually cause the collapse of racism. The poem encourages black people to persevere, to deepen and extend their contributions to American life and culture until those contributions are impossible to ignore.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

I, too, sing America.

The first line of "I, Too" establishes the poem's theme and hints at its form. The poem begins with a powerful, direct statement. The speaker insists that he also "sing[s] America." This statement is an allusion to a poem by Walt Whitman, "I Hear America Singing." In "I Hear America Singing," Whitman depicts America as a diverse country, with many different kinds of people doing many different kinds of jobs. However, they are all unified. Whitman uses a metaphor to describe this unity: they sing together, creating a harmonious choir that sings a common song.

Whitman's depiction of America is idealized—and it neglects many of the real conflicts that divide Americans. For instance, even though it was written in 1855, just five years before the American Civil War, "I Hear America Singing" makes no mention of slavery. Indeed, Whitman does not include black people at all in his account of American life.

The speaker of "I, Too" objects to this exclusion. The opening line of the poem should be seen as a direct response to Whitman. The speaker insists that he is also part of the American song. The reader learns later, in line 2, that the speaker is the "darker brother"—in other words, that he is a black man. So the speaker is saying that black people have contributed and continue to contribute to American history and culture—that their contributions are as important as those made by any of the white figures that appear in Whitman's poem.

The line is forceful, passionate. The strong, definite end-stop at the end of the line underscores this passion: the speaker does not have any doubts, nor does he leave room for debate or dispute. Further, this line will eventually become a refrain for the poem—it reappears, in a slightly different form, as the poem's final line. It is a point of certainty and conviction, a fundamental belief that shapes the rest of the poem.

The line is not in meter and it does not participate in a rhyme scheme. It is a line of free verse (and the rest of the poem will continue to be in free verse). Meter and rhyme are European poetic traditions—they emerge from largely white, often racist, cultures. In refusing these devices, the speaker thus strikes out to create a black literary voice, independent of European traditions.

However, his use of free verse also hints at the speaker's entanglement with Whitman: Whitman was one of the first poets to write in free verse. The speaker is using some of Whitman's poetic innovations even as he quarrels with the limits of Whitman's poetic vision. The reader should take this as a subtle argument about the scope of American literature: the speaker insists that black voices belong in the American literary canon, that they can use its distinctive devices and resources.

LINES 2-7

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

In the first line of "I, Too" the speaker argues that black Americans have contributed—and continue to contribute—to American culture, society, and history. In the poem's second stanza (lines 2-7), the speaker addresses the racism and segregation that black communities have endured in America.

The speaker uses an extended metaphor to do so. He compares America to a family. The speaker is a member of this family: he describes himself as the "darker brother." He is "darker" because he is of African descent, but he is a "brother" because he is still an American. Yet even though the speaker is part of this metaphorical American family, the white members of the family send him "to eat in the kitchen / When company comes." In other words, the family forces the speaker to eat by himself when there are other people in the house. Also worth noting here is that white families often employed black people in domestic work—as cooks, nannies, and so forth. As such, white people often relied on the labor of the same people they refused to associate with.

The speaker is thus criticizing the hypocrisy and absurdity of segregation, the forcible separation of white and black communities. The extended metaphor is reinforced by the use of assonance in the line. The repeated /ee/ sound in "me" and

"eat" binds the two words together, suggesting that the speaker's social status, even his identity, is bound up with where he eats. Additionally, the harsh /t/ and /ch/ sounds in the phrase, "eat in the kitchen," convey the hatred that underlies the phrase, the racism it expresses.

This extended metaphor also suggests something important about the psychology of racism: the reasons why white people force their "darker brother" to eat alone in the kitchen. They do so only "When company comes"—when other people are in the house. Even though they live in proximity with their "darker brother," white people try to hide that intimacy in front of other people. The speaker thus suggests that racism denies the close connections that already exist between white and black communities (again, with the former often outright relying on the latter).

The speaker closes the stanza with three short, end-stopped lines. Within the context of the extended metaphor, the speaker literally describes how he has a pleasurable, satisfying meal, despite being relegated to the kitchen. Metaphorically, the speaker argues here that segregation and racism will not make black communities weak or discouraged: instead they will "grow strong," developing independent economic and political power. The use of the word "But" makes it clear that this is a specific, intentional response to segregation, almost as if the speaker is making a rebuttal to the actions of white people.

Line 5's "But" is followed by the repetition of the word "And" at the start of lines 6 and 7, so that these last three lines become an instance of polysyndeton, a device in which coordinating conjunctions are repeated for emphasis. The speaker uses polysyndeton to add passion and intensity to his argument about racism. Devices like polysyndeton also help the speaker organize the poem in the absence of traditional devices like meter and rhyme.

Like the first line, lines 2-7 are all in free verse. The speaker employs free verse with dynamic freedom, switching up line lengths and employing sharp, surprising enjambments. As a result, the poem feels direct, unpretentious, and—at the same time—carefully and precisely organized.

LINES 8-14

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

In the poem's third stanza (lines 8-14), the speaker continues to discuss American racism—and outlines a powerful response to it. In lines 5-7, he described "grow[ing] strong." In lines 8-14, he describes the effects of his strength: the white members of the family will have to give him a seat "at the table / When company comes." The "table" is a symbol for respect and equality, the opportunity to participate in and shape American society. The speaker wants that opportunity: he wants to be able to shape and participate in his own society. The speaker's determination to acquire that opportunity is evident in the strong consonant sounds he uses in line 9: "I'll be at the table." With its hard /t/s and /b/s, the line expresses a passionate, powerful commitment to fighting racism without compromise.

The extended metaphor that the speaker used in lines 2-7 thus extends into lines 8-14: the speaker is still describing the dynamics of a family, and using those dynamics to reflect on American racism. Indeed, lines 8-14 repeat many of the key phrases that appeared in lines 2-7. (One could describe these repeated phrases and sentences in these two stanzas as parallelism, a form of repetition in which sentences follow a similar structure.) There are both similarities and differences in these repetitions. For instance, the phrase "eat in the kitchen" appears in both stanzas, without any change. But the circumstances in which it appears change. In line 3, it is a direct command that the speaker has to obey. In line 13, it is something that "Nobody'll dare / Say to me" because the white family has no choice but to give him a place at the table.

The differences between the phrases that repeat in the two stanzas register the change in the speaker's status: instead of being forced into the kitchen, he will become a powerful and respected participant in American life. But the similarities are also important. They teach the reader something important about the speaker's attitude toward racism. He's not going to ignore how he's been treated or find some other place to live: he's going to engage directly with his family's actions.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are in free verse. They do not have meter or rhyme. They tend to be very short—line 14 has only one syllable. And they are often enjambed. That makes the strongly end-stopped lines stand out. Line 10, for instance, is firm, emphatic, confident: the speaker has no doubt that he *will* be at the table "When company comes."

The short lines also throw emphasis on particular isolated words, like "Tomorrow" and "Then." All by themselves, these words underline that the speaker's vision is not yet real: the speaker imagines a time after racism has been defeated, but he is doing so while racism is still strong and powerful, still dominating the facts of his life. The poem presents a vision of American society in which racism will be overcome, but it is never utopian: it remains grounded in the oppression the speaker faces in the present.

LINES 15-18

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—
I, too, am America.

In lines 15-17, the speaker wraps up the extended metaphor

that began in line 2. He has been using it to describe American racism. In his metaphor, America is like a family; he is its "darker brother"—and he has been excluded, segregated, reduced to being a second class citizen. The speaker offers a two-pronged program for defeating racism. First, in lines 5-14, he described "grow[ing] strong"—and using his strength to force his white family members to give him a seat at the table. Now, in lines 15-17, he changes tactics.

He notes that his white family members will also "see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed." In other words, the speaker advocates combating racism not only through strength, but also *beauty*—through black economic/political power *and* through black cultural accomplishment. The word "besides" is an important clue here. It emphasizes that these are two separate—but related—ways of fighting racism.

The speaker uses a striking enjambment at the end of line 16. The reader is suspended for a moment, wondering how the white family will respond to their sudden recognition of the speaker's beauty. One can imagine a range of responses, from rage to admiration. The speaker expects that their response will be to "be ashamed." In other words, it is beauty that will lead white people to confront their own guilt. The enjambment captures this moment of realization. It thus subtly encourages the reader to think about how white Americans can and should respond to their own racism, and to the racist history of their country.

The poem's final line is a refrain: it repeats the poem's first line—albeit, with an important change. Instead of saying that he "sing[s] America," the speaker says "I, too, am America." In its second iteration, the speaker drops the allusion to Whitman: he no longer seems to need Whitman. He has gained confidence and authority over the course of the poem. He affirms directly and powerfully that he is part of America.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are in free verse, with sharp enjambments and variable line lengths. The last two lines of the poem are part of different stanzas, but they are bound together by alliterative /a/ and /uh/ sounds:

> And be ashamed—
> I, too, am America.

The alliteration links "ashamed" and "America." The poem thus suggests that the shame white people feel is as big as America. That is, white people not only feel ashamed when they recognize that the speaker is "beautiful"; they also feel ashamed for excluding him from America.

Additionally, although not the same sound, the repeated "a" in "am" and "America" establishes a connection between the two words. As a result, the speaker's assertion—that he is part of American history and life—feels even more powerful. The alliteration thus does two things at once. Like the poem itself, it emphasizes the centrality of black culture to American history. And it also protests the racism that excludes black people from American life.

SYMBOLS

KITCHEN

The "kitchen" broadly symbolizes the unequal treatment faced by black Americans. In lines 3-4, the speaker notes that he is sent "to eat in the kitchen / When company comes." On the one hand, this can be taken literally. Black people were often employed as domestic workers for white families—tasked with things like preparing food and caring for children. Despite relying on such workers, white families would push them into the background, refusing to treat them as equal human beings even as they benefited from their labor.

The kitchen is thus a key part of the poem's extended metaphor. In a poem that describes American racism, the "kitchen" symbolizes one of its most perverse expressions: segregation. Segregation meant the black people and white people had to stay separate, in everything from where they lived to what water fountains they used. Yet white families still relied on black labor—bringing black workers into their homes yet refusing to treat them as equal human beings or even acknowledge their presence socially. Sending the speaker to the kitchen represents white society's hypocritical treatment of him, its desire to benefit from his labor without acknowledging his humanity.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "kitchen"
- **Line 13:** "kitchen"

COMPANY

In "I, too," "company" symbolizes white society. "Company" literally means "guests" or "visitors." The white members of the American family seem to be ashamed of their "darker brother": they don't want to acknowledge their relationship to a black person in front of other people. This suggests that the white members of the family are hypocrites. They only hide the "darker brother" when other people are around.

This symbol is key to the poem because it shows that American racism and segregation are rooted in shame and denial on the part of white people. White people refuse to acknowledge that they are *already* part of an American family that includes black people; that they already share the same house (metaphorically, within the broader melting pot of American

society, and often literally in the sense of black people employed as domestic workers for white families). The poem implies that white people would rather keep up the appearance of superiority rather than acknowledge the equality and beauty of black people.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "company"
- **Line 10:** "company"

TABLE

In "I, too," the table symbolizes respect, equality, and opportunity. In lines 8-9, the speaker makes a prediction about the future. Even though now he gets sent to the "kitchen / When company comes," some day in the future he'll "be at the table." By the time the reader gets to this point in the poem, there is already a rich set of associations to draw on: the kitchen, for instance, represents segregation, and the whole situation is an extended metaphor for American racism.

The "table" adds another important layer to this extended metaphor. It symbolizes power and participation, the opportunity to engage meaningfully in American democracy—as an equal player, a respected contributor. When the speaker comes to the table "tomorrow," he will no longer be a second class citizen, but finally recognized as the full member of American society that he is.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "table"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

Although "I, Too" uses a lot of short, enjambed lines, the speaker also often employs end-stops. Though the two devices do different things, they work together to build the poem's critique of American racism. While the poem's enjambments create suspense and surprise—raising questions about racism—its end-stops also may convey the speaker's confidence that racism will end.

Take a look at the first line of the poem, for instance:

> I, too, sing America.

The line is an allusion to Walt Whitman's poem "I Hear America Singing." In that poem, Whitman describes a wide range of people "singing"—and argues that their voices join together to create a unified American song. But he doesn't include black people in his vision of America. The speaker objects to Whitman's poem: the speaker believes that black people *are* a key part of the American song. The end-stop at the end of line 1 conveys the force of the speaker's conviction, the power of his belief that he, too, is an important part of American history and culture. It suggests that he has no doubts on the issue, and that he will not accept any disagreement.

Something similar happens in the end-stop that appears in line 10, after two short lines:

> Tomorrow,
> I'll be at the table
> When company comes.

The "table" is a symbol for participating in American life. In other words, the speaker is insisting that a day will come when he is not excluded from American politics, treated as a second class citizen. The end-stop underscores the speaker's confidence that racism will eventually lose its power. Thus, the poem's end-stops underscore the speaker's powerful sense of certainty, his firm belief that racism will not last forever.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "America."
- **Line 2:** "brother."
- **Line 4:** "comes,"
- **Line 5:** "laugh,"
- **Line 6:** "well,"
- **Line 7:** "strong."
- **Line 8:** "Tomorrow,"
- **Line 10:** "comes."
- **Line 12:** "me,"
- **Line 13:** "kitchen,""
- **Line 14:** "Then."
- **Line 15:** "Besides,"
- **Line 17:** "ashamed—"
- **Line 18:** "America."

ENJAMBMENT

"I, Too" is written in free verse—which means that it doesn't have a set meter or rhyme scheme. Poets who write in free verse often use a lot of sharp, surprising enjambments, relying on them to help make their poem *feel* poetic in the absence of meter and rhyme. In "I, Too," Langston Hughes employs enjambment in this way. His enjambments reveal important things. They surprise the reader. And they help the poem—which is otherwise direct and plainspoken—feel poetic.

For example, look at the enjambment at the end of line 3:

> They send me to eat in the kitchen
> When company comes

This is a key moment in the poem. The speaker is using an extended metaphor to describe the effects of American racism. Here he uses the "kitchen" as a symbol for segregation, the forced separation of white people and black people. But he makes an important caveat: he is only sent to "eat in the kitchen" when there's "company"—that is, when other people are around.

This is surprising—and the enjambment at the end of line 3 is key to this effect. Pausing briefly at the end of line 3, the reader assumes that the speaker is always forced to "eat in the kitchen": that segregation is absolute. The next line then comes as a surprise: the speaker learns that it's actually only enforced under specific conditions. The enjambment thus underlines the difference between the way segregation appears and the actual circumstances of life in America. Though it seems like white and black people are separate from each other, they actually live—and have lived—in proximity to each other; they are part of the same family in the sense of them all being Americans. This can be understood more literally as well, since white families often employed black people as domestic workers yet did not treat them as social equals, forcing them into the background even as they relied on their daily labor.

Something similar happens with the enjambment at the end of line 16:

> They'll see how beautiful I am
> And be ashamed—

The enjambment creates a brief feeling of suspense. One wonders how white people will respond when they see the speaker's beauty. Shame is one possible response—but one could imagine others, from rage to admiration. The pause gives the reader space to imagine those other responses, to imagine what an appropriate response would be.

With enjambment, the speaker thus poses an important, implicit question about how white people should respond to their country's history of racism. And he also subtly pushes the reader to wonder whether shame is really the best response. The poem's enjambments thus perform important work in the poem: creating suspense and surprise that shapes the reader's understanding of race, racism, and segregation.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "kitchen / When"
- **Lines 9-10:** "table / When"
- **Lines 11-12:** "dare / Say"
- **Lines 16-17:** "am / And"

ALLITERATION

In "I, Too," the speaker uses alliteration to emphasize the injustice of racism—and to underscore the importance of black culture and history to America itself.

For example, take a look at the alliterative sounds that appear in lines 17-18:

> And be ashamed—
> I, too, am America.

"And" and "am" alliterate with the /a/ sound; "ashamed" and "America" share an /uh/ sound. Furthermore, although these word pairs employ different sounds, they all begin with "a" and so are linked visually. This alliteration and visual similarity create bonds between all these words.

On one hand, the link between "am" and "America" further emphasizes that the speaker is part of American history and life. On the other hand, the alliteration between "ashamed" and "America" subtly connects the shame that white people will feel about their own racism with America itself. In other words, the speaker suggests that white people will not only feel ashamed when they recognize that the speaker is "beautiful," but they will also feel ashamed for excluding him from American life. This alliteration thus does two things at once: it emphasizes the centrality of black people to American history and subtly protests the racism that excludes black people from American life.

Elsewhere in the poem, alliteration further establishes links between words. For instance, in lines 8 and 9 the phrase "Tomorrow, / I'll be at the table" adds emphasis to the speaker's expectation that the future will lead to further equality and respect. Moments like these also add musicality to this free verse poem that avoids rhyme, highlighting the speaker's search for beauty in the face of racism and oppression.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "k"
- **Line 4:** "c," "c"
- **Line 8:** "T"
- **Line 9:** "t"
- **Line 10:** "c," "c"
- **Line 15:** "B"
- **Line 16:** "b," "a"
- **Line 17:** "A," "b," "a"
- **Line 18:** "a," "A"

ASSONANCE

"I, Too" is a direct, plainspoken poem: it doesn't rely on a lot of fancy language or elaborate devices. But the poem does use assonance often. The poem's assonance helps the poem feel poetic, even though it doesn't have meter or rhyme. Furthermore, the assonance subtly underlines the speaker's argument against racism.

For example, listen to the assonant /ee/ sound that appears in

line 3:

> They send me to eat in the kitchen

And also in lines 12-13:

> Say to me,
> "Eat in the kitchen,"

The assonance subtly links together the word "me" and the word "eat," emphasizing that the speaker's identity is tied up with where he eats. This association is key to the poem. When it returns in lines 12-13, it marks the transformation in the speaker's status. He no longer eats alone, isolated from the white members of his family. Instead, he has forced them to give him a seat at the table.

On a related note, the use of assonance in the /uh/ sound in "company comes" in lines 4 and 10 adds a sense of musicality to the poem, even as it talks about the very ugly fact of segregation in American life. Here, the speaker adds a spark of beauty to a moment of hardship, capturing the desire to be "beautiful" that he expresses later in the poem.

The assonance in the poem thus registers the transformation in status that the speaker dreams about—even as it also registers the oppression he currently struggles against.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "A," "a"
- **Line 3:** "e," "ea," "i," "i"
- **Line 4:** "o," "o"
- **Line 5:** "au"
- **Line 6:** "A"
- **Line 7:** "A"
- **Line 10:** "o," "o"
- **Line 11:** "o"
- **Line 12:** "e"
- **Line 13:** "Ea," "i," "i"
- **Line 16:** "a"
- **Line 17:** "A," "a"
- **Line 18:** "a," "A," "a"

CONSONANCE

"I, Too" uses a lot of consonance. The consonant sounds that repeat through the poem help set its tone.

For instance, /n/ and /m/ sounds repeat in lines 3-4: "They send me to eat in the kitchen / When company comes." This repetition captures the repetitive nature of the racial injustices the speaker has faced throughout his life. The repeated sounds become almost numbing, refusing to allow any variation.

However, in line 9, the speaker uses consonance to express his own determination to end the racist treatment he endures:

> I'll be at the table

The line is full of hard /b/ and /t/ sounds. The harshness of these sounds expresses the speaker's determination, his unwillingness to compromise or sacrifice when it comes to fighting against racism. Meanwhile, the /l/ sound in the line is a little less harsh, a bit more soothing: it suggests the pleasure and peace the speaker will feel when racism is defeated.

The consonance that runs through the poem thus expresses the deep conflicts over race and racism that the speaker finds himself caught in—and his passionate commitment to defeating racism. This is a poem of struggle and protest: and it sounds forceful and powerful.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "m"
- **Line 2:** "m," "r," "k," "r," "r," "r"
- **Line 3:** "n," "n," "k," "n"
- **Line 4:** "n," "c," "m," "n," "c," "m"
- **Line 5:** "l"
- **Line 6:** "ll"
- **Line 8:** "T"
- **Line 9:** "ll," "b," "t," "t," "b," "l"
- **Line 10:** "n," "c," "m," "n," "c," "m"
- **Line 11:** "N," "d," "d"
- **Line 12:** "t"
- **Line 13:** "t," "n," "n"
- **Line 14:** "n"
- **Line 15:** "B," "s"
- **Line 16:** "s," "b"
- **Line 17:** "b," "m"
- **Line 18:** "m," "m"

ALLUSION

"I, Too" opens with its speaker making a bold, powerful assertion: "I, too, sing America." This statement is an allusion to a poem by the 19th century American poet Walt Whitman, "I Hear America Singing." In "I Hear America Singing," Whitman depicts America as a politically and socially unified place, with many kinds of people—from farmers to sailors, carpenters to housewives—singing together. They form a kind of harmonious chorus, despite their differences.

But Whitman does not mention black people in his poem. And even though the poem was written in 1855, just five years before the Civil War, he does not mention slavery. Whitman presents an idealized version of America; he fails to grapple with its complicated history of racism and slavery.

The first line of "I, Too" is thus not just an allusion to Whitman's poem. It is also a refutation. The speaker is insisting that black people are part of American history, that they have contributed—and will contribute—to the American "song." This

allusion is thus a powerful objection to Whitman's poem.

But it is more than just a quarrel between two poets. Walt Whitman is often described as the first truly American poet: the first poet to develop a distinctly American literary voice. In rejecting Whitman's narrow definition of Americanness, Langston Hughes is also rejecting Whitman's narrow definition of American literature. He insists that American literature can and should have space for black voices—and that those black voices are as American as any other.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I, too, sing America."

REFRAIN

"I, Too" uses several kinds of repetition. One important kind is its refrain: a repeated line that frames the poem.

This refrain first appears in the poem's opening line, "I, too, sing America." This line is an allusion to a poem by Walt Whitman, "I Hear American Singing." Whitman depicts America as a united, harmonious community—despite its many differences. But Whitman doesn't acknowledge that African American communities have made significant contributions to American culture and history. So, when it first appears, the poem's refrain is a pointed critique of Whitman's poem, and an affirmation of the importance of black people's contributions to American life.

The refrain reappears in line 18, the poem's last line. Here, the language has changed slightly. Instead of saying "I, too, sing America," the speaker says "I, too, **am** America." The two versions more or less say the same thing, but the second version of the refrain is more explicit, more direct than the first version. It feels like the speaker has gotten more confident over the course of the poem, and now feels comfortable being direct. No need to quarrel with Whitman anymore: he directly affirms the dignity and importance of his community's contributions to American life.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "I, too, sing America."
- **Line 18:** "I, too, am America."

EXTENDED METAPHOR

At the heart of "I, Too" is an extended metaphor. It describes racism in America during the 1920s (when the poem was written) and the transformations that the speaker hopes to see in American society. This extended metaphor stretches through the poem's three central stanzas.

In these stanzas, the speaker describes himself as the black member of a family: he is "the darker brother." The other members of the family—whom the speaker simply calls "they"—are implicitly white. Although they are family, although they live together, these white people send the speaker "to eat in the kitchen / When company comes." In other words, the white members of the family seem ashamed of the speaker—or, more precisely, ashamed of their intimacy with him. They don't want other people to see that they live in such proximity with him, so they force him into the background.

This all can be read literally, as white families often used black domestic workers (such as cooks). But it also can be understood more broadly as representing the dynamics of America at large—a place that denies the humanity of and shuns its black residents.

Taken as representative of racism more broadly, lines 2-4 can be thought of as describing segregation. Segregation is the way that white people separate themselves, physically, from black people: forcing them to live as second-class citizens. In this sense, the extended metaphor describes the reality of racism: the way it has affected life for black people in America.

But the extended metaphor also comments on the psychology of racism. The speaker suggests that his white family members are hypocrites. They already live with him—they just don't want other people to know it. In other words, the speaker suggests that American racism is rooted in shame and denial: white people refuse to acknowledge the powerful contributions that black people have already made to American life.

In lines 5-17, the speaker uses the extended metaphor to imagine powerful changes to American society. The speaker wants to end racism. And he uses the extended metaphor to imagine how that would happen. First, he imagines himself eating alone in the kitchen. Though he has been forced to the margins of American society, he nonetheless "eat[s] well" and "grow[s] strong." In other words, the speaker is saying that racism and segregation won't defeat black people or deplete their spirit: instead, it will make them tough and resilient.

With this strength and resilience, eventually no one will dare keep the speaker from eating "at the table / When company comes." This is due in part to the speaker's strength: he forces white people to give him a seat at the table. But it is also partly due to his beauty: "They'll see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed," the speaker argues in lines 16-17.

As he extends the metaphor through the end of the poem, the speaker thus presents two intertwined solutions to American racism. One involves building black power—political and economic—so they'll be given places of power and influence in American society: so that they'll have a seat at the table. The other involves building an independent black cultural tradition—or, more to the point, insisting on the value of the contributions black people have already made to American culture.

The poem's extended metaphor thus does crucial work for understanding the poem: it lays out the racism under which black communities suffer. And it proposes a complex, multi-

pronged program for addressing that racism.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-18

POLYSYNDETON

At the center of "I, Too" are a series of phrases and sentences that—through an extended metaphor—describe racism in America, and propose a plan for black resistance to it. These sentences are carefully organized in relation to each other, specifically through the coordinating conjunctions "but" and "and." In other words, the speaker is using polysyndeton.

The poem's main use of polysyndeton occurs in stanza two, as the speaker describes his plan to "grow strong" in the face of racism:

> But I laugh,
> And eat well,
> And grow strong.

The "but" in line 5 clarifies these lines. The speaker isn't having just any joyous, fulfilling meal. Instead, these lines should be understood as a direct response to racism—indeed, as a way of resisting it. In this instance, then, polysyndeton helps to show the relationship between the racism the speaker endures and the strategies for resistance he develops. Additionally, the repetition of "And" at the beginning of lines 6 and 7 doubles as anaphora, further emphasizing the strength the speaker begins to develop.

It's also worth noting that—although they technically aren't polysyndeton—there are instances in which the speaker uses adverbs to achieve similar effects. That is, these adverbs draw attention to the speaker's reaction to racism. For instance, stanza 3 ends on a single word: "Then." This word punctuates the stanza, lending it a kind of hopeful finality and confidence, while at the same time emphasizing that this is expected to occur in *the future*; it hasn't happened yet.

Note also how the poem's fourth stanza begins with the word "Besides":

> Besides,
> They'll see how beautiful I am
> And be ashamed.

The adverb "Besides" helps clarify that the speaker has been detailing separate, though related, strategies. On one hand, the speaker advocates building strength—political and economic power. On the other hand, he emphasizes beauty—the cultural achievements of African American communities.

Like polysyndeton, this use of adverbs helps emphasize and clarify the speaker's thinking. Taken together, these moments capture a passionate and precise account of hope in the face of racial oppression.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "But"
- **Line 6:** "And"
- **Line 7:** "And"
- **Line 14:** "Then"
- **Line 15:** "Besides"

PARALLELISM

In the second and third stanzas of the poem, the speaker uses a distinctive kind of repetition. The stanzas are structured around two similar sentences, and so could be considered instances of parallelism.

In stanza 2, the speaker observes of his family, "They send me to eat in the kitchen / When company comes." This is part of an extended metaphor for American racism: here the speaker is describing segregation, the forced separation of white and black populations. This sentence comes back, with some differences, in stanza 3. The speaker promises,

> Tomorrow,
> I'll be at the table
> When company comes.
> Nobody'll dare
> Say to me,
> "Eat in the kitchen,"
> Then.

There are similarities and differences between the two stanzas, both of which are important.

The differences are important because they register the change in the speaker's status: instead of being disempowered, forced into the kitchen, the speaker will be a powerful and respected participant in American life. At the same time, the similarities register the speaker's determination to fight his bad treatment under segregation and racism: rather than running away from this problem, he's going to stick with it and overcome it.

The similarities between these sentences also make their differences more powerful and palpable. The speaker's experience with racism in stanza two ("They send me to eat in the kitchen") makes his refusal in stanza three ("Nobody'll dare / Say to me, / 'Eat in the kitchen'") all the more poignant and powerful.

These two sentences are thus parallel without being the same. They employ repetition to underscore the repetitive nature of racism in America, yet at the same time they break with that repetition, capturing how racism can be overcome.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "They send me to eat in the kitchen / When company comes,"
- **Lines 9-10:** "I'll be at the table / When company comes."
- **Lines 11-12:** "Nobody'll dare / Say to me,"
- **Line 13:** ""Eat in the kitchen,""

VOCABULARY

Sing (Line 1) - Literally, to sing about America. But the speaker is also alluding to Walt Whitman's poem "I Hear America Singing." In that poem, "singing" is a metaphor for participating in the construction of American life. But Whitman's poem doesn't recognize black people's contributions to America—so here the speaker insists that the speaker, as a black man, also contributes to the American song.

America (Line 1, Line 18) - The United States. The speaker is invoking the country as a literal place, and—at the same time—he is also thinking about its history. In other words, the speaker is part of America's history, its present, and its future.

Darker Brother (Line 2) - In other words, the speaker is black. But note the comparison: he is "darker" than the other members of the family. The speaker thus compares him or herself to a group of white people, whom he does not name or describe. Yet he is still their sibling. Importantly, then, the speaker emphasizes the connections between white and black people. The speaker is intimately related to the other figures in the poem, a member of the family.

Kitchen (Line 3, Line 13) - Literally, the space where food is prepared. More broadly, it symbolizes a space out of sight and out of mind, where the white members of the family can hide their "darker brother" so they don't have to think or answer questions about him.

Company (Line 4, Line 10) - Visitors or guests.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"I, Too" is not a formal poem. It doesn't follow the rules of a fixed form, like the sonnet or the villanelle. And it doesn't have a set meter or rhyme scheme. Instead, it is written in five stanzas consisting of anywhere from one to seven lines. It is a free verse poem, with the short lines and strong enjambments that free verse poets often employ.

The speaker has a strong reason to refuse poetry's traditional forms. As one of the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes was determined to find a literary voice for black suffering, resistance, and resilience. "I, Too" is about the dignity of black life in America. The speaker suggests that black people (and black cultural traditions) are beautiful and worthwhile on their own terms. It makes sense, then, that the speaker of "I, Too" would avoid using devices like meter and rhyme, which are associated with European poetic traditions—and with the predominantly white (and often racist) cultures that produced these poetic traditions. In refusing these European traditions, the speaker seeks to create a way of writing about black culture that is specific to black life, and that isn't confined by white history.

Interestingly, not all participants in the Harlem Renaissance rejected white, European poetic forms. Rather, form was part of important debates within the Harlem Renaissance about how best to develop a black literary voice. In opposition to Hughes, some poets demonstrated that they were as capable as the giants of English literature when it came to handling difficult forms like the sonnet. Claude McKay does this in poems like "If We Must Die." So, the form of "I, Too," represents one possible strategy among many for developing a black literary voice.

METER

"I, Too" does not have a meter. It is written in free verse. Like many free verse poets, the speaker favors short, heavily enjambed lines. These lines tend to have a lot of variation in their rhythms.

For example, listen to the rhythm of lines 5-7:

> But I laugh
> and eat well
> and grow strong.

Each line has three syllables with two stresses apiece. But line 5 puts its stresses on the first and third syllable of the line, while lines 6-7 have an unstressed syllable followed by two stressed syllables. The poem's rhythm shifts around, expressing the ebb and flow of the speaker's passion.

Moreover, the length of the poem's lines also shifts—from nine syllables in line 3 to one in line 14. In its variable rhythms and line lengths, the poem consciously rejects European poetic traditions, which tend to prize stable rhythms and line lengths (such as iambic pentameter)—developing, in their place, an independent African American poetic tradition.

RHYME SCHEME

"I, Too" does not have a rhyme scheme. In fact, the poem does not rhyme at all. One might understand this resistance to rhyme as a reaction to white, European poetic traditions—which, since the Middle Ages, have put a lot of emphasis on rhyme. In his refusal of rhyme, the speaker is signaling his interest in developing an independent, black tradition.

However, Langston Hughes often wrote poems modeled on the blues—and those poems use a lot of rhyme, just like blues songs do. So it's not like Hughes is absolutely opposed to rhyme: he recognizes its place in black American traditions, even as he resists the influence of white, European poetry. This poem doesn't draw on those musical traditions, however: it is straightforward, plainspoken. It uses everyday language to express a powerful, important message about segregation and inclusion in American society.

So, the speaker's refusal to use rhyme has two dimensions. On the one hand, it signals the speaker's resistance to white poetic tradition. On the other, it marks the speaker's interest in being as straightforward and direct as possible as he articulates his powerful protest against American racism.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "I, Too" is a black man. In line 2, he refers to himself as the "darker brother." Taken literally, this suggests that he is part of a family—a family that includes people who are not as dark as he is. In other words, the family is mixed: it has both white and black members. However, the white members of the family are ashamed of their "darker brother": when other people—"company"—come over, they force the speaker to eat by himself in the kitchen.

This family drama, of course, is more accurately thought of as an extended metaphor. It describes racism and segregation in America. The speaker is thus not just a single black person: he more broadly represents black people's place in America culture. As the speaker describes his experiences, he also describes the way that black people's contributions to American history and culture have been ignored. The speaker has made significant contributions to American life; he is part of the American family. But white people refuse to acknowledge his contributions. They separate themselves from him, forcing him into the background.

The speaker's resilience also suggests the strength and perseverance of black communities. Although his contributions are ignored and although he is abused by white people, the speaker remains confident in his own beauty—and the beauty of the culture he represents. And he is confident that if it is powerful enough, this beauty will eventually force white people to recognize black people's contribution to American culture and history.

SETTING

"I, Too" has two settings, a literal one and a metaphorical one.

Most obviously, it's literally set in a house where a family lives. The speaker is part of that family: in line 2, he calls himself its "darker brother." In other words, the family is mixed, with both white and black members. But the speaker is persecuted by his white family members. The house is segregated: the speaker is forced to stay in the kitchen while the other members of the family entertain guests.

That said, it's best not to think of the poem so literally. This house, with its black and white family and its segregated spaces, is really part of an extended metaphor that describes American history and culture. The house is a metaphor for America itself. The events of the poem resonate with the complicated (and ongoing) history of racial injustice. As such, the setting of the poem could also be considered to be America as a whole.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Langston Hughes was one of the leading figures in the Harlem Renaissance, a black literary movement that flourished during the 1920s in Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City. During the Harlem Renaissance, writers like Hughes, Claude McKay, and Zora Neale Hurston worked to develop a distinctly black American literary voice—a way to express black culture, history, and identity.

Different writers took different approaches to this task. For instance, early in his career, Claude McKay wrote sonnets, demonstrating that he could match the giants of European literature on their own terrain. In poems like "I, Too" and "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Hughes took a different approach: rejecting European literary techniques like meter and rhyme, trying to develop new ways of writing to capture black experience. In doing so, he called on the example of poets like Walt Whitman—who had already started to experiment with free verse. "I, Too" builds on Whitman but also critiques him for excluding the black experience from his account of American life.

Regardless of the approach that Harlem Renaissance writers took, they had a common goal: they hoped to combat American racism through the power of their own poems, plays, novels, and stories. In other words, they hoped that they might contest racist policies and attitudes by demonstrating the power of black culture.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"I, Too" was first published in Langston Hughes' 1926 collection *Weary Blues*. It was written during the 1920s. This was a difficult and dark period in American race relations. Segregation was legal throughout the country. Black Americans lived as second class citizens, confined to isolated neighborhoods with poor schools. They often lacked the right to vote. The Ku Klux Klan was resurgent across the South and Midwest, intimidating black communities and frequently

lynching black men. For many black Americans, it was a desperate time—and many black families left their homes in the South to seek better jobs and better treatment in northern cities like New York and Chicago.

In response to the oppression they faced, black Americans built new institutions—like the NAACP—to fight for equal rights. Concentrated in Northern cities, new intellectual and cultural movements sprung up, with black artists, poets, and musicians mingling in blues clubs, speakeasies, salons, and galleries. These cultural movements were themselves very political, using artistic mediums to critique racism and press for equal treatment.

It's also worth noting that, at the time the poem was written, many white families employed black people as laborers, cooks, nannies, and other forms of domestic workers. Despite living in such proximity, however, these workers were denied equal treatment and relegated to the background. "I, Too" clearly takes aim at such hypocrisy, criticizing the absurdity of white families relying on the labor of black people while denying them decency, respect, and basic human rights.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "I, Too" Read Aloud — The poet Langston Hughes recites his poem "I, Too." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oiCWngPt-L4)
- All You Need is a Wall — A high school teacher imagines what happens to the speaker of "I, Too" when he steps out of the kitchen. (https://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/feature/all-you-need-is-a-wall-i-too-sing-america)
- "I, Too" and the Smithsonian Museum — Smithsonian historian David Ward writes about Langston Hughes' poem "I, Too" and reflects on its importance to the Smithsonian's attempts to preserve African-American culture and history. (https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/what-langston-hughes-powerful-poem-i-too-americas-past-present-180960552/)
- Langston Hughes Biography — A detailed biography of Langston Hughes from The Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/langston-hughes)
- An Introduction to the Harlem Renaissance — A detailed introduction to the Harlem Renaissance—with links to key poems by Hughes and other figures associated with the movement—from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/145704/an-introduction-to-the-harlem-renaissance)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LANGSTON HUGHES POEMS

- Let America Be America Again
- Mother to Son
- The Ballad of the Landlord
- Theme for English B
- The Negro Speaks of Rivers
- The Weary Blues

HOW TO CITE

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