Theme for English B

SUMMARY

The teacher said:

Go home and write a one-page essay tonight. If you let your writing come from your heart, it will be true.

Okay, but is it really that easy? I'm 22 years old, black, and was born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I went to school in Winston-Salem, then in Durham, North Carolina. Now I'm a student at Columbia University, on a hill above Harlem in New York City. I'm the only black student in the class. I walk home from class down the hill into Harlem, on the way crossing through a park, then crossing St. Nicholas avenue, Eighth Avenue, and Seventh Avenue. Finally, I get to the Harlem Branch of the YMCA. I take the elevator up to my room, sit down and write the poem you're reading right now:

It's hard to say what's true about me or you when you're only 22 years old, like I am. If I had to guess, I'd say that I'm the sum of everything I feel, see, and hear. I hear Harlem. I hear Harlem and Harlem hears me, and together we're talking on this page. And I hear the rest of New York City as well. So who am I? Well, I enjoy eating, sleeping, drinking, and loving people. I like to work and read, to learn new things and to understand life. I like when I get a pipe for Christmas, or some music—a record by Bessie Smith, a be-bop record, or something by Bach. Even though I'm black, I still like all the same things that people of other races like. So will this essay that I'm writing also be black? If it really is *me*, then it won't be white. But it will be part of you, teacher. You're white, yet you're also a part of me—just like I'm a part of you. That's what being an American means. Sometimes you don't want to be part of me—and sometimes I don't want to be part of you, either. But we're still part of each other—really! And just as I learn from you, you also learn from me, even though you're older, white, and also freer than I am.

This is my writing assignment for English B.

THEMES

RACE, IDENTITY, AND BELONGING

"Theme for English B" is a poem about the complexities of identity in a racist society. Its speaker—a black student at Columbia University in the 1950s—receives an apparently straightforward assignment: to write one page about himself. But that raises complicated questions for the speaker about his identity, about the relationship between black and white people, and about what it means to be American. As he works through these questions, the speaker arrives at a powerful argument against racism—and for his own place in American life. Black and white are not truly separate, the speaker argues; instead, they are each "part" of the other.

The poem begins with a simple assignment: "Go home and write / a page tonight." But the professor, who is white, places a restriction on the assignment: it has to be "true." As a black man, the speaker is thus unsure of how to proceed; as he says in line 16, "It's not easy to know what is true for you or me." At the heart of the poem, then, is a question about the relationship between race and identity. The speaker wants to know whether race determines his identity, asking: "will my page be colored that I write?"

The answer that the speaker arrives at is complex. Race *is* obviously important to his identity. So, "being me," the page that he writes "will not be white." And yet the things that *actually* define him—his habits and passions and hobbies—have no particular relationship to his race. He likes "the same things other folks like who are other races." To the speaker, race seems less like an intimate part of his identity, and more like an imposition, something used to classify him and to deny him opportunities.

Indeed, the speaker notes, race has created resentment and mistrust between himself and his professor. Sometimes, his professor doesn't "want to be part of me" and, equally, the speaker doesn't "often want to be a part of you." Yet, the speaker insists, they cannot deny their connection, the way they are linked together: "you are […] a part of me, as I am a part of you."

This is a bold assertion. The speaker is a black student in an overwhelmingly white institution. In fact, he's the "only colored student" in the room. It would be easy for him to feel alienated and alone—and it seems that sometimes he does. But he refuses to let that alienation obscure the underlying connection between himself and his professor, a connection that crosses race, age, and privilege. Even though the professor enjoys a prestigious job and is "somewhat more free" than the speaker—simply because the professor is white—they still learn from each other: "As I learn from you, / I guess you learn from me."

"Theme for English B" is thus honest and direct about racism and the way that it awards white people unfair privileges in American society. But it simultaneously refuses to believe that racism defines American society. Just the contrary is true: ultimately, the speaker argues, what makes both professor and student "American" is the way that they are *related* to each other—the way they are both "part" of each other. In order to recognize what's truly American, both student and professor

need to recognize the way that racism has obscured the deep connections between them. Written in the early 1950s as the Civil Rights Movement was gaining steam, "Theme for English B" thus makes a powerful case that being an American is about the connections that bind together communities and races—despite the very real prejudice that separates them.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-41

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

The instructor said, ...
... will be true.

The first 5 lines of "Theme for English B" set up the problem at the heart of the poem. The poem begins with an assignment: the "instructor"—a college professor at Columbia University in the 1950s—wants his class to "write / a page tonight." In other words, he wants a short paper. That seems straightforward enough. But then the professor introduces a crucial complication. He wants "that page" to "come out of you." In other words, he wants his students to explain who they are. The paper should be "true": it should reflect the students' identities honestly and fully.

This isn't a particularly imaginative assignment, or a particularly deep one: the professor is simply looking for a short personal essay or perhaps a poem. But, as quickly becomes clear, the assignment raises a series of complicated questions about race, identity, and belonging for the speaker. The speaker is one of the students in the class—and he spends most of the poem trying to sort out these questions.

Because these lines are mostly in the professor's voice—lines 2 to 5 are a direct quote from the professor—they don't quite fit formally with the rest of the poem. Generally speaking, "Theme for English B" is written in free verse: it doesn't have meter or a set rhyme scheme, though the speaker will occasionally use a rhyme. The poem's exploratory, open-ended form reflects the unsettled, searching character of the speaker's thinking. The professor, however, doesn't share the speaker's uncertainty: for him, this is a simple assignment for an introductory course, English B. So it's not entirely surprising to find that he uses rhyme in a much more steady way than the speaker does: lines 2 to 5 rhyme *AABB*. The rhymes are straightforward and direct, even a little trite ("write"/"tonight," "you"/"true"). They suggest that the professor's thinking is not only settled; it's also a little shallow. Like the rest of the poem, however, these lines are not in any meter; the length of the lines and their rhythm vary.

LINES 6-10

I wonder if ...
... in my class.

In lines 1-5, the speaker receives an apparently straightforward assignment: he has to complete one page of writing about himself. But the assignment has to be "true," it has to "come out of [the speaker]." These restrictions are what troubles the speaker throughout the poem. (The first five lines of the poem were mostly spoken by the professor, but from here forward, the speaker takes over). In line 6, he wonders if "it's that simple?" As the poem proceeds, it will gradually become clear why the speaker thinks that the assignment *isn't* that simple: identity is complicated—and it doesn't just involve what's within a person. It also involves that person's relationships—with friends, loved ones, and society at large.

Despite this initial objection, the speaker does try to fulfill the assignment. He starts with the basic facts about himself: he's 22 years old and he grew up in North Carolina, where he lived and studied in Winston-Salem and Durham, two of the biggest cities in the state. Now he's a student at Columbia University—the "college on the hill above Harlem." Columbia, an Ivy League university in New York City, is literally situated on a hill overlooking a historically black neighborhood, Harlem.

It's worth noting here that the college mentioned could also be Barnard, the women's college affiliated with Columbia, which overlooks Harlem as well. Since the poem doesn't *explicitly* specify the speaker's gender, it could theoretically be the story of a black woman attending Barnard (Columbia itself didn't admit women until 1983). But since Hughes himself attended Columbia and this poem is often taken to be somewhat autobiographical, this guide uses male pronouns to refer to the speaker and assumes that the college mentioned is Columbia.

Harlem is one of the centers of black culture in the United States—particularly as the home of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, a movement of black artists and intellectuals that Langston Hughes himself helped lead. So the poem suggests there's tension between the prestigious, mostly white, university—situated on a symbolic and literal "hill" that allows it to literally and figuratively looking down on "Harlem"—and Harlem itself as a center of black culture. That tension is reflected in the speaker's experience He's black—the "only colored student in [the] class." The speaker feels lonely and isolated in the class—and in this predominately white institution, with all its prestige and power.

Lines 6-10 are the first lines of the poem that are really in the speaker's voice, so they're the first chance the reader has to really get a sense of how he talks and thinks. The speaker is direct—disarmingly so. As he starts to work through these complicated—even intimidating—questions about identity, he avoids pretentious language and elaborate literary devices. He prefers to speak in straightforward, everyday language, using

free verse to do so: the poem doesn't have regular meter or a steady rhyme scheme.

But underneath his simple language, there are complicated and evocative things going on. For example, he uses anaphora in lines 6-8, repeating the word "I" at the start of each line. This helps bind the lines together, giving the reader the sense that the speaker is building a comprehensive picture of himself from these isolated details.

Similarly, the speaker generally avoids alliteration—which would perhaps be altogether too flashy for his purposes—but he does use it here and there to help advance his argument about race, identity, and belonging. For instance, there's an alliterative /h/ sound in line 9:

> to this college on the hill above Harlem.

The alliteration suggests that the tension between the "college on the hill" and "Harlem" need not exist: they are bound together—by a shared sound, if nothing else. This hints at an argument the speaker will make later in the poem about the connections between white and black people. Similarly, the speaker uses consonance in the next line to emphasize his loneliness, binding together "only" and "colored" with an /l/ sound:

> I am the only colored student in my class.

Additionally, the line is end-stopped, which gives it a sense of finality and certainty: despite all the questions the speaker has about his identity, he knows this fact for certain.

LINES 11-15

The steps from ...
... write this page:

In lines 11-15, the speaker describes how he gets from the "college on the hill" where he studies to his room in a YMCA in Harlem. He walks down a set of steps, through a park, and across a couple avenues; he takes an elevator up a few floors, and then heads to his room where he sits down at his desk to write.

These lines are apparently straightforward and unremarkable. On a literal level, they describe something mundane: walking home after class. But they also make an important point—albeit without exactly spelling it out. "Harlem" and the "college on the hill" may be separated from each other culturally, with the mostly white university literally and figuratively looking down on the black neighborhood. But they're actually quite close together physically: it only takes a few minutes and a couple of blocks for the speaker to cross from one to the other. Perhaps, the speaker quietly implies, they shouldn't be culturally separate either: maybe the university could learn something from the neighborhood it looks down on—and vice versa.

As the speaker settles in, the poem finds an easy, loping rhythm—perhaps matching the rhythm of the speaker's walk through New York City. These lines are written in free verse: they don't have a set meter or rhyme scheme. But they do use an occasional rhyme, like "class" and "St. Nicholas" in lines 10 and 12. And the many caesuras and the enjambment of line 14 ("elevator / up to") that run through the passage help it flow smoothly, giving it the dynamic feeling of a walk through a busy city.

LINES 16-20

It's not easy ...
... York, too.) Me—who?

In line 15, the speaker announces his intention to "write this page." The next stanza, lines 16-40, constitute his "page": they are the paper that the professor has assigned him to write. In lines 16-20, the speaker begins this paper by challenging his professor a little bit. He notes that it's "not easy to know what is true for you or me," despite what the professor said back in the first stanza. Then, after an enjambment, he explains why: he's only "22." In other words, he doesn't have the experience and wisdom yet to fully understand what makes up someone's identity.

But the enjambment also opens up another possibility: until the reader moves down to line 17, line 16 suggests that identity is simply hard to define no matter what—that no one, regardless of their age, really knows "what is true" for them. As the speaker opens his essay, he is already hinting at much broader questions about identity than the assignment originally seemed to ask.

The speaker then hazards a guess about his identity: "I'm what / I feel and see and hear[.]" In other words, his identity comes from the things he feels and from the world around him—most immediately, from Harlem itself. "Harlem, I hear you," the speaker announces. The reader might take this literally: the speaker hears the sounds of Harlem out his window. But it also might be a metaphor: the speaker *understands* Harlem and responds to its history as a center of Black culture. (And the repetition of the word "hear"—an instance of diacope—encourages the reader to think through its different uses, the way that it can be both metaphorical and literal).

In the next line, the speaker suggests that there *is* a kind of exchange going on between himself and his neighborhood: he "hear[s] you" and at the same time the neighborhood "hear[s] me." Thus, his "page" becomes a space where they converse: "we two [...] talk on this page." And through that conversation the question about the speaker's identity becomes sharper: instead of providing a safe, easy answer, the conversation with Harlem results in an even more forceful question: "Me—who?"

The difficulty of this question leaves its mark on the poem's form. These lines are twisty, complicated, and uncertain. They are marked by strong enjambments: the speaker's sentences

spill awkwardly across the line breaks. This suggests that the speaker is uncomfortable: instead of proceeding with confidence, he is testing things out, measuring possibilities. And the lines are also marked by lots of short, fragmentary sentences divided by caesuras. That gives the lines a jerky, awkward feeling. And it underscores the difficulty the speaker has in answering—or even posing—these questions about identity. For example, his final question, "Me—who?" is ungrammatical, awkward, and divided by a strong caesura—which feels like a long, uncomfortable pause as the speaker figures out how to pose this question, let alone answer it. The effect is much different than if the speaker had simply said: "Who am I?"

However, these lines are also united by strong, assonant internal rhymes, between "see," "me," and "we." These assonant rhymes bind the lines together and provide them with a strong sense of rhythm that guides the reader through their choppy sentences, enjambments, and caesuras. This sense of connection indicates that there *is* an answer to these confusing questions; the speaker just hasn't figured out how to express it yet. Although these lines are written in free verse—and therefore lack a steady meter and rhyme scheme—the speaker finds other ways to give them rhythm and poetic integrity.

LINES 21-26

Well, I like ...
... are other races.

In lines 16-20, the speaker reaches something like a crisis: he can't decide what's "true" about himself—indeed, he can hardly even pose the question. But in lines 21-26, the speaker takes a step back and seems to return to solid ground. He lists a series of stable facts about his habit and the things he likes—in the hope that a comprehensive picture of his identity will emerge from these simple pieces of information. (He uses anaphora once again to bind these facts together, repeating the phrase "I like" at the start of lines 21-23). But his habits are unremarkable. He likes normal things: eating, sleeping, drinking, falling in love; he listens to a wide range of music, from be-bop to Bach.

As the speaker surveys his interests and his habits, he arrives at an important conclusion—a conclusion which will unlock a meaningful response to his professor's assignment. The things he likes *are* normal and unremarkable. That is, just because he's black doesn't mean that he likes different things from white people or anyone else. As the speaker says, using a double negative:

> I guess being colored doesn't make me *not* like
> the same things other folks like who are other races.

In other words, he likes all the same things that white people like. And this raises a key question for the poem—about whether (and how) the speaker's race is related to his identity. The speaker will pose that question in the next set of lines, and then propose a surprising and potentially subversive answer to it.

These lines are written in free verse. They have no meter or rhyme scheme, though lines 22 and 25 do feature a slant rhyme of "life" and "like." The speaker also uses consonance to give these lines a subtle sense of rhythm and music, even in the absence of an established meter. Note the consonant /l/ sound in line 21:

> Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.

The line also contains an alliteration, between "like" and "love." The use of consonance supports that alliteration, without making it feel ostentatious or overly loud. Indeed, though the lines are filled with subtle and sophisticated musical devices, they manage to sound relaxed and informal—as though the speaker were talking directly and without pretense to the reader. Consonance—which is quieter than alliteration but still consequential in the reader's experience of the line—is crucial to striking this balance.

LINES 27-30

So will my ...
... of you, instructor.

In lines 21-26, the speaker realizes something important: he likes all the same things that white people like. And that raises a key question for the poem. The speaker wonders whether—and how—race and identity are related to each other. More specifically, he wants to know if being black fundamentally shapes his identity or not.

He poses that question directly in line 27: "So will my page be colored that I write?" In other words, he wants to know if his "page," his answer to the professor's assignment, will reflect his blackness. He acknowledges that it will—in some ways. "It will not be white," he announces in line 28. This is, in part, a joke: after he writes his "page" it will be covered with ink, so it won't be white as the blank page was. But this line is also a reflection on identity itself. If the speaker's "page" is really "true" to himself, if it is "me," then it will acknowledge and incorporate his race: blackness is part of who he is.

But that's not the whole story. In lines 29-30, the speaker introduces a key qualification—something that changes the dynamics of the poem and its consideration of race. The speaker argues that his "page" will "be / a part of you, instructor." The speaker is using a metaphor here: the paper isn't *literally* part of the professor. Rather, the speaker is saying that even as his "page" reflects the speaker's blackness, it also testifies to his connection to his professor. They are bound together, even though they belong to different races, black and white.

This is a radical and disruptive idea. At a moment in American history where white and black people were segregated, separated into different neighborhoods and schools, the speaker is saying that black people and white people are not as distinct as such racist laws suggest. The image of the speaker's "page" reinforces this point, with its black ink mingling with the remaining white space of the paper; indeed, this poem on its own page creates the same visual effect for the reader.

As the speaker poses this provocative and potentially subversive idea, there are some signs that he feels a little nervous about it. Note, for instance, the sharp enjambment between line 29 and line 30. Line 29 is the shortest line in the poem so far, only four syllables long. And it ends right in the middle of a sentence. It thus feels cut off, abbreviated—as though the speaker catches himself right in the middle of saying it and pauses, deciding whether he really wants to advance this idea. By contrast, lines 27 and 28 rhyme strongly—"write" and "white"—and both are strongly end-stopped, suggesting that the speaker feels collected and confident. In the formal variations among lines 27-30, one gets a sense of the flexibility and resourcefulness of the poem's form. Written in free verse, without an established rhyme scheme or meter, it is free to alter its form to reflect and reinforce the shifts in the speaker's state of mind.

LINES 31-33

You are white— ...
... That's American.

In lines 29-30, the speaker makes a provocative assertion about the "page" he's writing for his professor. Even as the assignment reflects his blackness, it also a "part of you, instructor." In other words, if the speaker is really being "true" to himself, then he has to acknowledge the full complexities of his own identity. Sure, blackness is part of who he is—but it's not the whole story. The deep connections he feels with people of other races, including his white professor, are also essential to who he is.

In lines 31-33, he elaborates, explaining that idea more fully. Addressing his professor directly, the speaker says "You are [...] a part of me, as I am a part of you." In other words, student and professor both contribute to each other's identities. And, more broadly, black and white people do not form separate communities, with separate identities: instead they learn from each other and shape each other. They are bound together and can't be fully separated. As the speaker announces in line 33, "That's American." In other words, for the speaker, being an American is about the connections between people—not the divisions.

That's a potentially radical statement—at least at the time the poem was published, in the early 1950s. Written just on the cusp of the American Civil Rights Movement—in which black Americans protested segregation and discrimination, advocating for equal rights—the speaker calls into question the very foundation of segregation: the notion that black and white people can be separated from each other. For the speaker, any such separation is un-American and even, at a fundamental level, impossible. But as the speaker makes this powerful and potentially subversive argument, he seems confident and collected: gone are the uncertain enjambments that he used elsewhere. These lines are firm and strongly end-stopped.

Indeed, instead of concealing or masking his argument, the speaker uses repetition to bring out its most radical possibilities. Line 32 contains an instance of parallelism, in the repetition of the phrase "a part of me [...] a part of you." Because the two parts of the sentence are equivalent grammatically, it suggests that professor and student should also be equal legally and politically. And the speaker also uses chiasmus in lines 31-32 to hint that white and black communities shouldn't be confined to distinct places in American society. In the first clause, the professor comes first, followed by the speaker:

> You are white—
> yet a part of me,

In the second clause, it's the other way around:

> as I am a part of you.

The professor and the speaker trade places, pirouetting around each other—and the lines thus suggest that equivalent transformation and mobility is possible, even desirable, in American political and cultural life.

Like the rest of the poem, these lines are written in free verse, without a set meter or rhyme scheme. Indeed, they vary widely in length: lines 31 and 33 are only three and four syllables long, respectively, while line 32 has twelve syllables. Here, the changes don't seem to reflect shifts in the speaker's confidence. Just the contrary: the short lines are strong and definite. They suggest that the speaker has no questions about the argument he's making.

LINES 34-36

Sometimes perhaps you ...
... are, that's true!

In lines 31-33, the speaker proposes a bold and potentially subversive idea about the relationship between black and white people: they are "part of" each other. As the speaker says, addressing his white professor, "you are [...] a part of me, as I am a part of you." In proposing this idea, the speaker implicitly criticizes racism and segregation, which separate black and white communities into separate neighborhoods and schools.

But as the speaker makes this critique of segregation and discrimination, he doesn't shy away from the bad feelings that centuries of racism and oppression have left behind. In lines

34-35, the speaker acknowledges that sometimes, neither he nor his professor "want to be a part" of each other. The professor's reason is presumably that he's at least a little bit racist and looks down on his only black student. The speaker, in turn, doesn't want to be "a part of" his professor because he resents the discrimination and hatred that he encounters when he interacts with white people.

The speaker of the poem is thus straightforward and honest about the painful legacies of racism, and here he highlights the way that it continues to shape the relationships between black and white communities, leaving them full of mutual resentment and mistrust. But, the speaker insists in line 36, "we are [part of each other], that's true!" In other words, the bad feelings between professor and student, white and black, don't erase the connections between them—the way that they are "part of" each other still persists. That connection, the speaker indicates, is more powerful than hatred or fear.

These lines are written in free verse: they have no meter or regular rhyme scheme. As the speaker advances his bold argument about race, the form of the poem reflects his confidence and his conviction in what he's saying. Each of these lines is end-stopped, making them feel definite and forceful. And lines 35-36 rhyme with each other—one of the occasional rhymes that pops up here and there in the poem. That rhyme adds extra force to these lines.

LINES 37-41

As I learn ...
... for English B.

In lines 37-41, the speaker wraps up his essay, his "page for English B," by summarizing the argument he's made across the rest of the poem. It's true that his professor is "older—and white— / and somewhat more free" than the speaker: the professor has more power, prestige, and racial privilege than his young black student. But, for the speaker, those differences don't ultimately matter. What matters is the connection between them, the way that he and his professor are each "part of" the other.

The speaker restates that argument (in slightly different terms) in lines 37-38: "As I learn from you, / I guess you learn from me." Even though the professor holds the power in the classroom—and even though he's the one who's supposed to be doing the teaching—they actually both teach other. Under the surface, they are equals and they enrich each other's lives equally. In these lines, the speaker uses parallelism and chiasmus again, much like he does in lines 31-32. There's a repetition of a parallel phrase, "learn from you [...] learn from me." And there's a chiastic repetition of pronouns: "I," "you," "I," "you," "me"—which once again quietly suggests that professor and student, white and black, can and should trade places and learn from each other.

The final line of the poem reminds the reader that this long stanza (lines 16-40) is part of an assignment: the speaker is answering his professor's demands for a "page" that's "true," that "come[s] out of you." Looking back over that stanza, it is surprising to see where the speaker has arrived. He starts the stanza struggling to answer the question. But by the end of the stanza, he's developed a powerful argument about who he is and how he relates to the society around him—and he's willing to challenge that society and push back against the way it frames and limits his identity as a black man.

That confident conclusion is reflected in the poem's form. The final 11 lines of the stanza contain only two enjambments, in lines 29 and 37. (And the enjambment in line 37 feels controlled and carefully placed: it sets up and emphasizes the parallelism in lines 37-38). His argument may be surprising—or at least, it might've been for some readers in the 1950s. But he makes it with considerable poise and self-assurance, which contrasts with his earlier modesty and uncertainty. Over the course of the poem, the speaker seems to come into his own—to find his footing, his sense of himself. And he also develops a sense of his relationship to the difficult, racist society in which he lives, arguing powerfully for his place in that society and the essential interconnection of all people.

SYMBOLS

THE HILL

In line 9, the speaker notes that his college—Columbia University—sits on "the hill above Harlem." Here, the speaker is describing the literal geography of New York City: Columbia *is* situated on a hill which rises above Harlem, a historical center of black culture. But the speaker also uses the "hill" as a symbol for the sense of superiority, entitlement, and white privilege that surrounds an Ivy League university like Columbia. After all, the hill puts Columbia *above* Harlem, so that the University literally looks down on it. The very positioning of the University conveys a sense of power and superiority.

More generally, the symbol of the "hill" has an important place in American life. In 1630, John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts, described the colony as a "shining city on a hill"—a model of Christian piety and virtue that, he hoped, would inspire the rest of the world. Americans have often thought of their country in these terms: as a model for the rest of the world, above and separate from it. Using the "hill" as a symbol here, the speaker alludes to this tradition—and also implicitly criticizes it. After all, Columbia's isolation on its "hill" is a result of segregation, a refusal to interface with the vibrant neighborhood just beyond its gates. As the speaker stresses, counting off the streets he crosses on his way home, it's just a short walk from one seemingly separate world to the other. The speaker's use of the symbol thus suggests that the myths about

America's exceptional status rely on segregation and racism.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "hill"
- **Line 11:** "hil"

POETIC DEVICES

END-STOPPED LINE

"Theme for English B" uses both end-stop and enjambment throughout the poem. However, the speaker doesn't establish a pattern or a set of rules about when he uses one or the other. Instead, the speaker's use of end-stop and enjambment tends to reflect his confidence and certainty (or lack thereof) as he works through difficult questions about race, identity, and belonging.

When the speaker is feeling confident about his ideas, he tends to employ end-stop. The reader can see this in lines 7 and 10:

> I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem. (7)
> I am the only colored student in my class. (10)

In both lines, the speaker is making factual statements, describing in direct, straightforward language his life and his circumstances as a black student at Columbia University in the 1950s. Though the speaker will eventually question whether these statements are enough—whether they really describe his identity—they start as points of certainty and strength, things the speaker can hang onto as he plumbs the complexities of identity. The end-stops reinforce this sense of strength and certainty: they make the lines feel definite and indisputable.

Notably, the speaker uses more end-stop toward the end of the poem. Most of the last 12 lines of the poem are end-stopped, including powerful and controversial statements like the ones the reader finds in lines 31-33:

> You are white—
> yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
> That's American.

Here the speaker is challenging racism directly, arguing that American identity comes from the connections between different races—not the prejudice that divides them. Even as he makes this challenge, he remains confident and self-assured, and that sense of calm and strength is reflected in the end-stops. They make the lines feel definite, controlled, and unequivocal: the speaker has no doubts about what he's saying.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "said,"
- **Line 3:** "tonight."
- **Line 4:** "you—"
- **Line 5:** "true."
- **Line 6:** "simple?"
- **Line 7:** "Winston-Salem."
- **Line 9:** "Harlem."
- **Line 10:** "class."
- **Line 11:** "Harlem,"
- **Line 12:** "Nicholas,"
- **Line 13:** "Y,"
- **Line 15:** "page:"
- **Line 18:** "you:"
- **Line 19:** "page."
- **Line 20:** "who?"
- **Line 21:** "love."
- **Line 22:** "life."
- **Line 24:** "Bach."
- **Line 26:** "races."
- **Line 27:** "write?"
- **Line 28:** "white."
- **Line 30:** "instructor."
- **Line 31:** "white—"
- **Line 32:** "you."
- **Line 33:** "American."
- **Line 34:** "me."
- **Line 35:** "you."
- **Line 36:** "true!"
- **Line 37:** "you,"
- **Line 38:** "me—"
- **Line 39:** "white—"
- **Line 40:** "free."
- **Line 41:** "B."

ENJAMBMENT

The speaker of "Theme for English B" generally uses end-stopped lines to mark moments of confidence and certainty. By contrast, the speaker turns to enjambment when he is feeling less certain about the complicated issues he's negotiating. Note, for example, the enjambments in lines 16-18:

> It's not easy to know what is true for you or me
> at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what
> I feel and see and hear, Harlem: I hear you:

The enjambments at the end of lines 16 and 17 reflect the uneasiness the speaker feels as he tries to decide "what is true for you or me." Just as the speaker's thoughts and ideas are incomplete, so too are his lines incomplete: the sentences continue past the line breaks, unspooling as he weighs different ideas about identity. Only when the speaker arrives at something definite and concrete—he can hear the sounds of

Harlem outside his window—does he use an end-stop. The use of enjambment in these lines thus reflects and amplifies the sense of uncertainty the speaker feels as he examines difficult questions about his own identity.

At the climax of the poem, when the speaker announces his conclusion about race and identity, the reader once again finds enjambment—enjambment that suggests how apprehensive the speaker feels at first about the ideas he's putting forward:

> But it will be
> a part of you, instructor.

The speaker almost seems to pause, to hesitate, at the end of line 29 before putting forward this controversial and disruptive idea about race. The enjambment here thus reflects the speaker's initial anxiety about his own ideas—and his sense that they are challenging and controversial; these ideas break with the status quo in American society. However, once the speaker has put forward this idea, he then uses almost exclusively end-stopped lines for the rest of the poem. This is a hard idea to articulate at first. But once he does articulate it, it feels good and right to the speaker: he becomes confident and self-assured even as he proposes a series of ideas that challenged the racial status quo in America at the time the poem was written.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "write / a "
- **Lines 8-9:** "here / to"
- **Lines 14-15:** "elevator / up"
- **Lines 16-17:** "me / at"
- **Lines 17-18:** "what / I"
- **Lines 25-26:** "like / the"
- **Lines 29-30:** "be / a"

CAESURA

Caesuras appear frequently throughout "Theme For English B." The most significant caeuras in the poem help the speaker negotiate the complicated questions that he's thinking through—questions about race, identity, and belonging.

Note, for instance, the caesura toward the end of line 20:

> (I hear New York, too.) Me—who?

The speaker is asking himself who he is. The question is unsettling: it raises complicated issues around race, identity, and Americanness. The power of the question—the extent to which it upsets the speaker—is evident in the weird way the speaker poses it. Instead of asking "who am I?" he asks "Me—who?" The question is ungrammatical; it is broken up by a caesura, which reads like a long, awkward pause as the speaker tries to figure out exactly who this "me" really is. The best he can do, at this point in the poem, is come up with a question: "Who?" In this instance, the caesura registers the speaker's discomfort with the question his professor wants him to answer.

Later in the poem, the speaker uses caesura to help him think about the relationship between himself, as a black college student, and his white professor. Consider lines 31 and 32:

> You are white—
> yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.

The caesura at the center of line 32 serves two functions at once. On the one hand, it subtly underlines the distinction between "me" and "you." In this way, it hints at the racial and status divides that separate student and professor. At the same time, it separates the line into two clean halves, balancing the two claims: "you are […] a part of me" and "I am a part of you." In this way, the caesura suggests that both claims are equally important—and that speaker and professor are each equally part of the other. In other words, the caesura subtly suggests that black students and white professors (and indeed, black people and white people more generally) are equal—despite the differences in power between them. In this way, it helps the poem make its case that racism and discrimination obscure the underlying connections between people of different races.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Then, it"
- **Line 7:** "twenty-two, colored, born"
- **Line 8:** "there, then Durham, then"
- **Line 12:** "park, then"
- **Line 13:** "Avenue, Seventh, and"
- **Line 14:** "Y, where"
- **Line 15:** "room, sit down, and"
- **Line 17:** "twenty-two, my age. But"
- **Line 18:** "hear, Harlem, I"
- **Line 19:** "you, hear me—we two—you, me, talk"
- **Line 20:** "York, too.) Me—who"
- **Line 21:** "Well, I," "eat, sleep, drink, and"
- **Line 22:** "work, read, learn, and"
- **Line 24:** "records—Bessie, bop, or"
- **Line 28:** "me, it"
- **Line 30:** "you, instructor"
- **Line 32:** "me, as"
- **Line 36:** "are, that's"
- **Line 39:** "older—and"

ALLITERATION

The speaker of "Theme for English B" wrestles with a series of tough questions about race, identity, and belonging. But as he does so, he uses simple and straightforward language. The

speaker avoids anything that feels pretentious. As a result, he only uses alliteration infrequently: alliteration can make a poem seem contrived, since alliteration often feels distant from everyday speech. When the speaker uses alliteration, he does so to make an important point or to underline an aspect of his argument about race and identity that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Take, for example, the alliterative /h/ sound that appears in lines 9 and 11:

> to this college on the hill above Harlem. (9)
>
> The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem, (11)

The alliteration is notable for a few reasons: first, it happens twice in quick succession. This suggests that the speaker wants the reader to pay attention to it. Second, it links together two things that are otherwise opposed to each other: Columbia University, the prestigious, largely white institution on the "hill," and Harlem, the African American neighborhood that it literally looks down on. The alliteration suggests that the distinction between these two places is not as absolute or important as it might initially seem. And, in that way, the alliteration here anticipates the speaker's broader argument: that the connections between races—not the things that divide them—are at the heart of what being American is all about. Although the speaker generally avoids using alliteration, preferring a direct and unpretentious tone, in moments like this, the speaker turns to alliteration to help underline his argument about race and identity.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "i," "i"
- **Line 7:** "t," "t"
- **Line 8:** "th," "th," "th"
- **Line 9:** "th," "th," "h," "H"
- **Line 10:** "c," "st," "c"
- **Line 11:** "st," "h," "H"
- **Line 15:** "r," "wr"
- **Line 16:** "n," "kn"
- **Line 17:** "tw," "t," "w," "l," "l"
- **Line 18:** "l," "h," "H," "h," "y"
- **Line 19:** "h," "y," "h," "m," "t," "y," "m," "t"
- **Line 20:** "h," "Y," "t," "M"
- **Line 21:** "l," "l"
- **Line 22:** "l," "l," "l"
- **Line 23:** "l," "p," "p"
- **Line 24:** "B," "b," "B"
- **Line 25:** "b," "m," "m"
- **Line 26:** "o," "o"
- **Line 28:** "B," "b"
- **Line 29:** "B," "b"
- **Line 32:** "p," "p"
- **Line 34:** "p," "w," "p"
- **Line 35:** "w," "p"
- **Line 36:** "w"
- **Line 37:** "fr"
- **Line 38:** "l," "fr"
- **Line 40:** "f"

ASSONANCE

The speaker of "Theme for English B" often stays away from showy alliteration, favoring simple, unpretentious language. But he does use assonance and consonance fairly often. These devices less showy than alliteration; they allow the speaker to supply the poem with a subtle but strong sense of rhythm and music.

For instance, note the /ee/ and /oo/ sounds that run through lines 18-19:

> I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:
> hear you, hear me—we two—you, me, talk on this
> page.

These lines are choppy, full of strong caesuras and fragmentary sentences. This reflects the speaker's uncertainty as he tries to work out some complicated questions about his identity. But at the same time, the assonance guides the reader through the passage, helping to establish a strong sense of rhythm that runs through the lines. This is especially true since many of these moments of assonance are also instances of internal rhyme. Those internal rhymes are particularly strong and forceful, making them more noticeable to the reader. While assonance is often soft and almost imperceptible, these instances of the device stick out and guide the reader through the lines.

They also help support the speaker's argument. The assonance between "me" and "we," for instance, binds together the speaker and Harlem, emphasizing the connection between the speaker and his neighborhood. More broadly, since Harlem is a historical center of black culture, the assonance underlines the speaker's links to the history of black artistic and intellectual life—suggesting that, for him, his identity comes in part from his relationship to that tradition.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "o," "o," "i"
- **Line 3:** "a," "i"
- **Line 4:** "a," "ou"
- **Line 5:** "i," "i," "ue"
- **Line 6:** "l," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 7:** "l," "i," "i"
- **Line 8:** "l," "o," "oo," "e," "e," "e"

- **Line 10:** “l,” “e,” “y,” “a”
- **Line 11:** “i,” “i”
- **Line 12:** “a”
- **Line 13:** “l,” “Y”
- **Line 14:** “ Y,” “l,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 15:** “o,” “oo,” “i,” “i,” “a”
- **Line 16:** “ea,” “y,” “o,” “ue,” “ou,” “e”
- **Line 17:** “y,” “o,” “y,” “l,” “l”
- **Line 18:** “l,” “ee,” “ee,” “ea,” “ea,” “ou”
- **Line 19:** “ea,” “ou,” “ea,” “e,” “e,” “o,” “ou,” “e,” “a,” “o”
- **Line 20:** “ea,” “oo,” “e,” “o”
- **Line 21:** “l,” “i,” “ea,” “ee,” “e”
- **Line 22:** “l,” “i,” “o,” “ea,” “a,” “a,” “i”
- **Line 23:** “l,” “i,” “i,” “e,” “e”
- **Line 24:** “e,” “e,” “ie,” “o,” “a”
- **Line 25:** “ei,” “e”
- **Line 27:** “y,” “l,” “i”
- **Line 28:** “e,” “i,” “e,” “i,” “i,” “e,” “i”
- **Line 29:** “i,” “i,” “e”
- **Line 30:** “ou”
- **Line 31:** “ou”
- **Line 32:** “a,” “o,” “a,” “o”
- **Line 34:** “ou,” “o,” “e,” “e”
- **Line 35:** “o,” “a,” “o,” “e,” “ou”
- **Line 36:** “e,” “ue”
- **Line 37:** “l,” “ea,” “o,” “ou”
- **Line 38:** “l,” “ou,” “ea,” “o,” “e”
- **Line 39:** “ou,” “o”
- **Line 40:** “ee”
- **Line 41:** “i,” “i,” “i,” “B”

CONSONANCE

Although the speaker of “Theme for English B” often avoids using alliteration, he does frequently turn to consonance. Consonance is not as loud as alliteration: it allows the speaker to infuse the poem with a subtle rhythm and music, without the highly artificial, literary feel that alliteration can give a poem.

Listen, for instance, to the /l/ sound in line 21:

> Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.

There’s alliteration in the line—“like” and “love” alliterate. But it’s not a particularly strong alliteration: the two words are at opposite ends of a long line; most readers will barely notice it. But the alliteration is supplemented by consonant /l/ sounds in “well,” and “sleep.” Those are again soft, barely noticeable, but they pull the line together, giving it a steady beat, a subtle rhythm. The consonance helps give the line its music, but it doesn’t overwhelm the line or the reader: it remains direct and plainspoken.

The speaker also uses consonance to reinforce his arguments about race and identity in America. For instance, note the /l/ sound in line 10:

> I am the only colored student in my class.

Here, consonance links together “only” and “colored,” emphasizing the sense of isolation that the speaker feels. But it also links up with some key words in the next line:

> The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem…

Like the alliterative /h/ sound in “Hill” and “Harlem,” the /l/ sounds in the words bind them together, suggesting that the differences between Harlem, an African American neighborhood, and Columbia University—the largely white Ivy League university that literally looks down on it—aren't as important as people might think. In this way, consonance subtly supports the poem’s argument against racism and racial divisions.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “tr,” “t,” “r”
- **Line 2:** “m,” “t”
- **Line 3:** “p,” “t,” “t”
- **Line 4:** “t,” “p,” “m,” “t”
- **Line 5:** “t,” “t”
- **Line 6:** “w,” “t,” “t”
- **Line 7:** “t,” “w,” “t,” “t,” “r,” “r,” “n,” “n,” “W,” “n,” “s,” “t,” “n,” “S,” “m”
- **Line 8:** “n,” “t,” “t,” “th,” “th,” “n,” “m,” “th,” “n”
- **Line 9:** “th,” “ll,” “th,” “h,” “ll,” “H,” “l,” “m”
- **Line 10:** “m,” “l,” “c,” “l,” “t,” “m,” “c,” “l,” “ss”
- **Line 11:** “st,” “s,” “m,” “h,” “ll,” “l,” “d,” “d,” “H,” “rl,” “m”
- **Line 12:** “r,” “r,” “k,” “c,” “r,” “ss,” “S,” “ch,” “s”
- **Line 13:** “th,” “v,” “v,” “th,” “m”
- **Line 14:** “r,” “m,” “r,” “r,” “r”
- **Line 15:** “m,” “m,” “t,” “wr,” “t”
- **Line 16:** “n,” “t,” “t,” “kn,” “w,” “wh,” “tr”
- **Line 17:** “t,” “tw,” “t,” “t,” “m,” “t,” “m,” “wh,” “t”
- **Line 18:** “h,” “r,” “H,” “r,” “m,” “h,” “r”
- **Line 19:** “h,” “r,” “h,” “r,” “m,” “t,” “m,” “t”
- **Line 20:** “h,” “M,” “wh”
- **Line 21:** “ll,” “l,” “k,” “l,” “k,” “l”
- **Line 22:** “l,” “k,” “rk,” “r,” “d,” “l,” “r,” “d,” “r,” “d,” “l”
- **Line 23:** “l,” “k,” “r,” “r,” “s,” “s,” “r,” “s”
- **Line 24:** “B,” “b,” “B”
- **Line 25:** “b,” “c,” “d,” “d,” “n,” “t,” “m,” “k,” “m,” “n,” “t,” “k”
- **Line 26:** “k,” “k,” “r,” “r,” “r”
- **Line 27:** “r,” “t,” “w,” “r,” “t”
- **Line 28:** “B,” “t,” “t,” “b,” “t”
- **Line 29:** “B,” “t,” “t,” “b”
- **Line 30:** “rt,” “tr,” “t,” “r”
- **Line 31:** “r,” “t”

- **Line 32:** "t," "p," "rt," "m," "m," "p," "rt"
- **Line 33:** "m"
- **Line 34:** "m," "m," "p," "r," "p," "n," "t," "n," "t," "t," "p," "rt," "m"
- **Line 35:** "N," "r," "f," "t," "n," "nt," "t," "rt," "f"
- **Line 36:** "t," "r," "t," "tr"
- **Line 37:** "l," "r," "fr," "m"
- **Line 38:** "l," "r," "n," "fr," "m," "m"
- **Line 39:** "l," "r," "l," "r," "wh," "t"
- **Line 40:** "m," "wh," "t," "m," "r"
- **Line 41:** "s," "s"

METAPHOR

"Theme for English B" is a direct, unpretentious poem. As the speaker wrestles with serious, difficult questions about race, identity, and belonging, he mostly avoids using flashy, poetic language: the poem contains no similes and only a few metaphors.

The metaphors it does contain tend to be understated. They don't stick out and disrupt the poem; instead, they quietly support the questions it raises and the answers at which the speaker eventually arrives. A good example comes in line 18, where the speaker describes how he "hear[s]" Harlem. The reader can interpret this literally: the speaker is hearing the sounds of Harlem out his window. But it could also be a metaphor for the speaker's relationship with Harlem: he understands its culture, so he hears its demands and complaints about life in a racist society. The line works both ways, literally and metaphorically, and in both ways it quietly adds urgency to the speaker's investigations into the relationship between race and identity.

When the speaker does begin to articulate his understanding of race and identity, he relies on another metaphor to do so. The idea is complicated and challenging enough that he needs the support of metaphor to explain what he's thinking:

> But it will be
> a part of you, instructor.
> You are white—
> yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.

The speaker and his professor aren't literally "part" of each other—they have separate bodies. Rather, this is a metaphor for all the things they share as Americans: a common history, language, culture, and a common future. Indeed, since each is just a "part," they aren't whole unless they are bound together. The metaphor thus suggests that America itself isn't whole unless black and white people recognize the ways that they are indissolubly linked together, despite racist laws and attitudes that try to separate black communities from white ones. Although "Theme for English B" largely favors literal, unpretentious language, this metaphor is at the heart of the argument the poem makes against racism.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "And let that page come out of you"
- **Line 18:** "Harlem, I hear you"
- **Line 20:** "(I hear New York, too.)"
- **Line 27:** "So will my page be colored that I write? "
- **Line 28:** "Being me, it will not be white."
- **Lines 29-30:** "But it will be / a part of you, instructor."
- **Lines 31-32:** "You are white— / yet a part of me, as I am a part of you."
- **Lines 34-35:** "Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me. / Nor do I often want to be a part of you."

ANAPHORA

As the speaker wrestles with tough questions about race, identity, and belonging, he turns to anaphora to help him build a portrait of himself and his identity.

The device first appears in the poem's third stanza: lines 6-7 and line 10 all start with the word "I": "I wonder," "I am," "I went," and "I am." These repetitions bind the lines together and contribute to the sense that the speaker is slowly building a comprehensive picture of himself through the accumulation of these little details. Although the details that appear in each line are small, the anaphora gives the reader—and perhaps the speaker too—confidence that they are adding up to a meaningful portrait of the speaker.

Something similar happens in lines 21-23:

> Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.
> I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.
> I like a pipe for a Christmas present,

Once again, the speaker uses anaphora to bind together a set of lines that contain mundane details about his habits and his interests.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "I"
- **Line 7:** "I"
- **Line 8:** "I"
- **Line 10:** "I"
- **Line 21:** "I like"
- **Line 22:** "I like"
- **Line 23:** "I like"

REPETITION

As the speaker investigates a series of urgent questions about race, identity, and belonging, he often turns to various kinds of repetition to help him pose his questions and find his answers.

For instance, the speaker uses diacope to investigate his relationship to the black community—present in the poem through the references to Harlem throughout—by repeating the word "hear":

> ... But I guess I'm what
> I feel and see and **hear**, Harlem, I **hear** you:
> **hear** you, **hear** me—we two—you, me, talk on this page.

The repetition of "hear" allows the speaker to reflect on the way that his relationship with Harlem (and the larger black community) is reciprocal: they both "hear" each other. In other words, if the reader takes this as a metaphor, they understand each other and are sensitive to each other's concerns.

Later in the poem, the speaker turns to parallelism to emphasize his relationship with his professor. For instance, in lines 31-32, the repetition of the phrase "a part of" repeats in two parallel clauses:

> You are white—
> yet **a part of** me, as I am **a part of** you.

This a bold assertion: the speaker is arguing that white and black people should not be separated or segregated (at a time when they were often forced into separate neighborhoods and schools). The speaker's use of parallelism here emphasizes just how radical the argument is. Because the two parts of the sentence are equal and equivalent grammatically, it suggests that white and black, professor and student, should also be equal legally, politically, and culturally.

Note also the use of chiasmus in these same lines:

> You are white—
> yet a part of me,
> as I am a part of
> you.

In the first clause, the professor ("you") comes first, followed by the speaker ("me"); in the second clause, it's the other way around. They trade places, circling around each other. This subtle, quiet grammatical movement once again has important implications for the poem's political argument: it shows that white and black people don't need to be locked in their respective positions; they can trade places with one another and understand each other's lives. The speaker later uses parallelism and chiasmus in almost exactly the same way in lines 37-38. Repetition, in its various forms, is thus central to the poem. It allows the speaker to pose difficult questions about race and identity—and allows him to offer radical ideas about how to move past racism.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "then Durham, then here "
- **Lines 17-19:** "But I guess I'm what / I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you: / hear you, hear me—we two—you, me, talk on this page."
- **Line 21:** "I like"
- **Line 22:** "I like"
- **Line 23:** "I like"
- **Lines 25-26:** "I guess being colored doesn't make me / not / / the same things other folks like who are other races."
- **Line 25:** "like"
- **Line 30:** "a part of you"
- **Lines 31-32:** "You are white— / yet a part of me, as I am a part of you."
- **Line 34:** "a part of me"
- **Line 35:** "a part of you"
- **Lines 37-38:** "As I learn from you, / I guess you learn from me—"

VOCABULARY

Page (Line 3, Line 4, Line 41) - One page. In other words, a short paper or essay for a college course.

Colored (Line 7, Line 10, Line 25, Line 27) - Black. At the time the poem was written, this was the standard term used in the United States to describe African American people; it does not have a derogatory sense in this context.

Winston-Salem (Line 7) - A city in North Carolina.

Durham (Line 8) - Another city in North Carolina.

This College (Line 9) - Columbia University, which sits on a hill in New York City, overlooking Harlem. Alternatively, this poem could also be interpreted as having a female speaker, in which case the college in question would be Barnard, the women's college affiliated with Columbia.

Harlem (Line 9, Line 11, Line 14, Line 18) - A historically black neighborhood just north of Columbia University in New York City.

St. Nicholas (Line 12) - An avenue in New York City.

Eighth Avenue (Line 13) - A street in New York City.

Seventh (Line 13) - Another street in New York City.

Y (Line 13, Line 14) - The YMCA, a place where students could rent cheap rooms.

Records (Line 24) - Music recorded on vinyl records.

Bessie (Line 24) - The blues singer Bessie Smith.

Bop (Line 24) - Be-bop, a style of jazz popular in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Bach (Line 24) - J.S. Bach, a 17th-century German classical composer.

English B (Line 41) - The college writing course in which the speaker is enrolled.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Theme for English B" is a dramatic monologue, written in the voice of a 22-year-old black college student. The poem has 41 lines, divided into five stanzas with very different lengths. Some stanzas, like the first and last, are just one line long; the fourth stanza, by contrast, is 25 lines long. Some of its lines are also short—as few as three syllables—and others are much longer, up to 13 syllables. The poem thus clearly doesn't have a set form, and nor does it use a regular meter or rhyme scheme (although an occasional rhyme pops up here and there). Instead, it is written in free verse.

As a result, the poem feels very loose and unstructured. That's intentional. The poem records the speaker's musings as he attempts to puzzle through difficult questions about identity and belonging in a racist society. He doesn't have all the answers; instead, he's trying to work them out as he goes. The poem's loose form, with all its variations and transformations, reflects the nature of the speaker's thoughts: the poem shifts and changes alongside the speaker's evolving thinking.

METER

"Theme For English B" is written in free verse—so it doesn't have a set meter. Indeed, the rhythm of the poem often shifts. Some of its lines are very short: as few as 3 syllables, like line 3 ("You are white—"). Others are much longer. Line 26, for instance, has 13 syllables ("the same things other folks like who are other races."). The speaker tends to use longer lines at the start of the poem, but switches to shorter lines around line 27 ("So will my page be colored that I write?"). In other words, the poem's rhythm—and the length of its lines—shifts as the speaker's *thinking* shifts. After all, the speaker is working things out, thinking through some difficult and complicated questions. The poem's variable rhythms reflect the variations and changes in the speaker's ideas as he slowly works toward answers.

RHYME SCHEME

"Theme For English B" is written in free verse, so it doesn't have a rhyme scheme. But the poem does occasionally use rhyme. For instance, "class" and "St. Nicholas" basically rhyme in lines 10 and 12; so do "you" and "who" in lines 18 and 20. These rhymes appear and disappear, highlighting individual moments instead of creating a solid, regular scheme.

Notably, however, the assignment from the professor (lines 2-5, "Go home and write [...] Then, it will be true.") *is* written in rhyming couplets:

AABB

Those rhymes contribute to the sense that there is something smug about the assignment and perhaps about the professor more generally: the rhymes feel too easy, too definite, given the complexity of the questions the professor is asking.

Because of the complexity of those questions—and the difficulty the speaker has answering them—a strong rhyme scheme would be inappropriate to the poem. After all, the speaker is working things out—asking big questions about race, identity, and belonging, and struggling to find the answers. Given this provisional and open-ended thinking, it wouldn't make sense to have a very strong, organized rhyme scheme; that would suggest a degree of control and planning that doesn't fit with the exploratory character of the speaker's thinking. But the occasional rhymes that pop up here and there in the poem *do* fit that thinking: like the speaker's tentative answers to these big questions, the poem's rhymes are themselves tentative, improvised, and partial.

However, the speaker does often use internal rhymes—as in the rhymes between "see," "me," and "we" that run through lines 18-20. These internal rhymes, which rely heavily on assonance, help give the poem a strong sense of rhythm, even in the absence of a traditional rhyme scheme. This underlying coherence hints that the speaker *will* arrive at some kind of answer to these confusing questions, even if he hasn't articular this answer just yet.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Theme for English B" is a black, 22-year-old college student studying writing at Columbia University in New York. Since the poem doesn't specify the speaker's gender, the speaker *could* technically be either a Columbia student *or* a student at Barnard, the women's college affiliated with Columbia (Columbia itself didn't admit women until 1983). However, Hughes himself attended Columbia and this poem is often interpreted as autobiographical, so this guide uses male pronouns to refer to the speaker and assumes that he is attending Columbia.

The speaker also reveals that he is black and grew up in the South; he describes studying in Winston-Salem and Durham, cities in North Carolina, before he came to Columbia. He now lives in Harlem, a predominantly black neighborhood just to the north of Columbia. Throughout the poem, the speaker reflects on the difficulties of being a black student in a largely white university. He is the "only colored student" in the class; he struggles to define himself in the face of white racism. The apparently innocent assignment that the teacher offers—to write a page-long paper explaining who he is—thus occasions a searching inquiry into his own identity and his relationship to

American life.

SETTING

"Theme for English B" is set in New York City, most likely during the 1950s. The speaker is a student at Columbia University in Manhattan; he lives in Harlem, a predominantly black neighborhood located near the university.

As the speaker meditates on his identity and his place in American society, the setting of the poem offers some implicit commentary on the issues that he's struggling with. Columbia University is one of the most prestigious universities in the country—it's an Ivy League institution, founded before the Revolutionary War. Yet, it is almost all white: the speaker is the "only colored student" in his class. And, to make matters worse, the university is right next door to Harlem—one of the historical centers of black culture in America. It's just a few blocks away—a point the speaker makes by listing the handful of streets he has to cross to get back to his room at the Harlem Branch YMCA. There's thus a sense that runs through the poem that both black people and black culture have been excluded from this powerful and prestigious university—and that the speaker himself is not entirely welcome within it.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Theme for English B" was first published in 1951 as part of Langston Hughes's 13th book of poetry, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. The poem thus came relatively late in Hughes's career (he died in 1967). As a young man, though, Hughes was a leader of the Harlem Renaissance, a literary and cultural movement that championed black artistic and intellectual expression. As a result, Hughes became one of the most important poets of the 20th century, someone to whom younger poets often turned as a model.

The Harlem Renaissance spanned the 1920s and included other writers such as Zora Neale Hurston. The movement also saw the development of jazz music, the influences of which can be seen in other poems by Hughes (such as "The Weary Blues," which is also set in Harlem and focuses on the black experience in America).

Although it seems to be set in the 1950s, "Theme for English B" seems to reflect this earlier time in Hughes's life. He was himself a student at Columbia University during the 1920s—an experience Hughes found deeply alienating and uncomfortable. The divisions that the poem draws between Columbia and nearby Harlem reflect Hughes' own experience moving between the two spaces: one hostile and racist, the other vibrant and full of energy. As the speaker wrestles with his own sense of belonging in a racist society, the poem may be said to do the same, asking whether and when universities like Columbia will acknowledge the accomplishments and cultural energy of the Harlem Renaissance and of people of color more generally.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Theme for English B" was likely written in the late 1940s or early 1950s, a time of transformation in American society. Many African Americans had served bravely in World War II, giving their lives to their country. But they returned to a land where they were denied basic civil rights, including the right to vote. As the poem was written, frustration with this unjust situation was building and beginning to boil over. It would soon result in the American Civil Rights Movement, in which black Americans across the country demanded equal rights.

As the poem was being written, then, many of the questions the speaker asks—about his place as a black man in American society; about his relationship with white people like his professor—were urgent, pressing questions at both personal and national levels. People were actively rethinking these issues, interrogating the racist structures under which they lived. Though the poem doesn't explicitly acknowledge this context, it should nonetheless be understood in relation to it—as an active contribution to the pressing questions of the day.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "Theme for English B" Read Aloud — The playwright Jermaine Ross reads "Theme for English B" aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rekrCJi2QNQ)
- Hughes's Life Story — A detailed biography of Langston Hughes from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/langston-hughes)
- Poetry and the Civil Rights Movement — A collection of poems and resources from the Poetry Foundation focused on the poetry of the Civil Rights Movement. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/146367/poetry-and-the-civil-rights-movement)
- An Introduction to the Harlem Renaissance — A detailed introduction to the African American literary movement, with links to important poems and poets. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/145704/an-introduction-to-the-harlem-renaissance)
- Early Black Students at Columbia University — An article by Paulina Fein on the way tha first black students to attend Columbia University were treated.

(https://columbiaandslavery.columbia.edu/content/treatment-and-framing-early-black-students-columbia-university-0)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LANGSTON HUGHES POEMS

- I, Too
- Let America Be America Again
- Mother to Son
- The Ballad of the Landlord
- The Negro Speaks of Rivers
- The Weary Blues

HOW TO CITE

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