

As I Grew Older



POEM TEXT

1 It was a long time ago.
 2 I have almost forgotten my dream.
 3 But it was there then,
 4 In front of me,
 5 Bright like a sun,—
 6 My dream.

 7 And then the wall rose,
 8 Rose slowly,
 9 Slowly,
 10 Between me and my dream.
 11 Rose slowly, slowly,
 12 Dimming,
 13 Hiding,
 14 The light of my dream.
 15 Rose until it touched the sky,—
 16 The wall.

 17 Shadow.
 18 I am black.

 19 I lie down in the shadow.
 20 No longer the light of my dream before me,
 21 Above me.
 22 Only the thick wall.
 23 Only the shadow.

 24 My hands!
 25 My dark hands!
 26 Break through the wall!
 27 Find my dream!
 28 Help me to shatter this darkness,
 29 To smash this night,
 30 To break this shadow
 31 Into a thousand lights of sun,
 32 Into a thousand whirling dreams
 33 Of sun!

years ago and have nearly forgotten by now. At first, their dream seemed as radiant as the sun itself, and it was right there for the taking.

But gradually, a barrier separated them from the life they dreamed of. The barrier grew higher, dimming their hopes until it blocked them from their dream completely like a wall blocking out sunlight.

It cast a shadow over their life, leaving them with the realization that society defined them as Black.

The shadow drains their energy. They can't see their dream above or in front of them anymore, just the huge racial barrier and the shadow it casts.

They urge their dark hands (symbols of Black power) to find the strength to smash the barrier and attain their dream. They call on their hands to break down the sinister barrier, until not only the radiance of their original dream, but the delirious light of a thousand dreams shines through.



THEMES



BLACKNESS, RACISM, AND ASPIRATION

"As I Grew Older" laments the difficulty of achieving one's dreams as a Black person in a racist society. Its Black speaker describes a "wall" that has risen between them and the "dream" they once aspired toward. This wall [symbolizes](#) racism, which has blocked out the guiding "light" of the speaker's dream and left them in "shadow"—a shadow they associate with "black[ness]" itself. Still, they remain determined (or desperate) to "Break through the wall!" and "Find my dream!"—in other words, to conquer racial barriers and fulfill their aspirations. Racism, the poem implies, hinders Black people from attaining goals that are as necessary and nourishing as sunlight. As a result, it breeds both constant frustration and a furious desire to overcome its obstacles.

The poem's Black speaker imagines racism as a "wall" standing between themselves and their goals. As the poem opens, the speaker has "almost forgotten" the "dream" they once cherished. They don't specify what this dream involves (love? success? happiness? all of the above?), but they compare it to "a sun": something illuminating, sustaining, and central to their lives.

The speaker recalls a "wall" that "Rose slowly [...] Between me and my dream." This wall "Dimm[ed]" their dream and left them in "Shadow," causing them to realize that "I am black." The wall represents the racial barriers they encountered, which showed that white society viewed them as different, lesser, and



SUMMARY

The speaker reflects on a dream (aspiration) they had many

unworthy of their goals. "As [They] Grew Older," the speaker became increasingly frustrated by the "thick wall" of racism and the "shadow" it forced them to live under. Once the reality of racism set in, their youthful aspirations no longer seemed attainable: "the light of my dream" was "No longer [...] before me."

Yet the speaker's frustration doesn't quite turn into despair. The poem shows how dreams can survive the hell of racism, while intensifying the desire to "smash" racial barriers. Right after suggesting that their hopes have died, the speaker cries out with fresh determination: "My hands! / My dark hands! / Break through the wall! / Find my dream!" Though the speaker feels angry and desperate, they haven't given up. Racism is *blocking* their dream, but it hasn't *extinguished* their dream.

If anything, their dream has intensified in the face of racism. They feel a passionate desire to "shatter" the "darkness" of prejudice—to "break" through racial barriers "Into a thousand lights of sun." [Metaphorically](#), their dream once had the power of a *single* sun; now it's taken on a vast, cosmic intensity. It may be a dream of ending racism for everyone, not just succeeding on an individual level.

"As I Grew Older" is one of many Langston Hughes poems that center on Blackness, racism, and dreams, including the so-called American Dream. In this early exploration of his signature themes, he conveys the frustration of thwarted dreams with great urgency and emotional directness.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-33



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

*It was a long time ago.
I have almost forgotten my dream.
But it was there then,
In front of me,
Bright like a sun,—
My dream.*

The opening [stanza](#) (lines 1-6) introduces the poem's speaker and hints at its central conflict.

The title ("As I Grew Older") has already suggested that this is a mature speaker reflecting on their youth. The first two lines reinforce this idea by reflecting on the past: "It was a long time ago. / I have almost forgotten my dream." Right away, this seems to be a poem about disappointment—about lost ideals, hopes, or aspirations. Yet the [simile](#) that follows suggests that the speaker's old "dream" lingers vividly in their memory:

*But it was there then,
In front of me,
Bright like a sun,—
My dream.*

It's not stated outright what this "dream" is, but it boils down to the vision of a better life—the life the speaker hoped to lead. This vision was once a guiding light for them, like "a sun": something powerful, central, and sustaining. It hovered "in front of [them]," as if ripe for the taking, back when their whole *life* lay in front of them. Already, though, it seems as if this vision slipped away as they "Grew Older." (Many of Langston Hughes's most famous poems concern the necessity of dreams in human lives, and the agony of thwarted or "deferred" dreams; see the Context section of this guide for more.)

This first stanza establishes that the poem is written in [free verse](#) (it contains no [rhyme scheme](#) or [meter](#)). Every line is [end-stopped](#); that is, it breaks after a grammatical pause indicated by a comma, period, or other punctuation. (This pattern will hold until the last stanza, which contains two [enjambments](#).)

The poem takes its form from the natural flow of the speaker's thoughts rather than a conventional poetic pattern, so the language sounds organic, almost conversational. The punctuation ending each line, however, makes the language seem somewhat reined in or confined—appropriate to a poem about harsh limitations.

LINES 7-10

*And then the wall rose,
Rose slowly,
Slowly,
Between me and my dream.*

Using the [simile](#) in lines 3-6 as a starting point, lines 7-10 begin to build out an [extended metaphor](#). If the speaker's dream was like "a sun," the obstacle that's blocked them from attaining it was like a "wall," rising "slowly, / Slowly, / Between me and my dream." (Notice how the short lines here—including line 9, which contains only one word—make the language itself move more "slowly.")

As with the "dream," the speaker doesn't identify the exact nature of this metaphorical "wall." (At least not yet.) The poem's title suggests that the wall rose as the speaker "Grew Older," meaning that it became more obtrusive—or the speaker became more aware of it—as they reached mature adulthood. Later clues in the poem will identify the speaker as "black" and closely link the "wall" with racism. In other words, as the speaker aged, racial barriers hindered them from reaching their aspirations. But the poem unfolds this revelation "slowly," so that the reader absorbs it in the same gradual way the speaker did.

Notice that this is the third straight sentence in the poem to end with "my dream" (see lines 2 and 6). The next sentence

(lines 11-14) will end with the same phrase. This [repetition](#) hints that the speaker remains intensely focused on—or preoccupied with—their "dream" even as it seems to have vanished behind the "wall."

LINES 11-16

*Rose slowly, slowly,
Dimming,
Hiding,
The light of my dream.
Rose until it touched the sky,—
The wall.*

Lines 11-16 develop the poem's [extended metaphor](#), adding new details about the [figurative](#) "wall" that separated the speaker from their "dream."

In line 11, the speaker reiterates that the wall "Rose slowly, slowly" (see lines 8-9). Again, the [repetition](#) and short lines slow down the language itself, so that the pacing reflects the image being described. The speaker adds that the wall "Dimm[ed]," then "Hid[ed]," the sun-like "light" of their "dream." These verbs also convey a gradual process, indicating that the wall first partially obscured, then fully obstructed the metaphorical "light." (However, it didn't *extinguish* the light, which still hovered out of range, like the sun. Basically, the dream lives on somewhere.)

The wall became so formidable that it seemed to "touch[]" the sky," totally preventing the speaker from attaining their goals or even moving forward in their life. [Symbolically](#), the speaker feels trapped or imprisoned, unable to achieve their full potential.

Notice that line 16 breaks a pattern established by the previous four sentences/sentence fragments, each of which ended with the phrase "my dream." The sentence fragment in lines 15-16 ends, instead, with "The wall." This subtle effect drives home the idea that the wall has *replaced*—or at least temporarily blocked out—the speaker's dream.

LINES 17-23

*Shadow.
I am black.
I lie down in the shadow.
No longer the light of my dream before me,
Above me.
Only the thick wall.
Only the shadow.*

Lines 17-23 link the speaker's vanished "dream" with the problem of racism. Previously, the source of their frustration—the "wall" blocking their way—has been unclear. Now, building on the poem's [extended metaphor](#), they imagine this "wall" casting a "Shadow," which they associate with Blackness itself:

Shadow.
I am black.

Though the language here is plain, the [symbolism](#) is complex. Walls are artificial human constructions; they're not natural objects. This wall seemingly "rose" of its own accord (lines 7-16), like a growing plant, but in reality, the speaker's society *built* it. It represents the racial barriers America and other white-dominated cultures impose on "black" people. Once the wall rose over the speaker, it cast a "Shadow" over their life, bringing (or coinciding with) the realization that "I am black." This statement has two related implications:

1. The speaker is Black (is of African descent).
2. The wall, or racial barrier, has [figuratively](#) left them in a dark place (of oppression, depression, etc.).

Since the wall is artificial, its "Shadow" is artificial as well—but the harm it does to darker-skinned people is very real. Similarly, a shadow, in the literal sense, is not a solid substance, but it's a visible phenomenon. The "wall" and its "Shadow" (racial barriers and their impact) may be unnatural, unnecessary, and lacking in intellectual substance, but the speaker has to deal with them anyway.

At first, in lines 19-23, the speaker seems thoroughly discouraged. They "lie down in the shadow" as if resigning themselves to it. (Compare an [idiom](#) like "take [something] lying down," meaning to accept an insult or injustice without a fight.) The speaker adds that they can "No longer" see the "light of [their] dream," even high "Above" them—just the giant obstacle blocking it. The [anaphora](#) in lines 22-23 conveys a sense of grim finality:

Only the thick wall.
Only the shadow.

But the poem isn't over yet. In the final [stanza](#), the speaker will recover a sense of determination.

LINES 24-27

*My hands!
My dark hands!
Break through the wall!
Find my dream!*

The final [stanza](#) suddenly shifts gears. The speaker addresses their own "hands" in a kind of [apostrophe](#):

My hands!
My dark hands!
Break through the wall!
Find my dream!

Whereas the speaker had sounded defeated in the previous stanza, now they seem to feel a fresh burst of energy or hope. They are newly determined, or else simply desperate, to "Break through the wall!"—that is, smash the racial barrier standing in their way. They summon the strength of their own "dark hands," as if trying to get back in touch with their *inner* strength, and trying to turn the disempowered state of Blackness ("dark[ness]") into a source of power. (Hands are [symbolically](#) associated with work and action; think of a phrase like "taking matters into your own hands.") The speaker is now resolved to "Find my dream!"—meaning the dream was never completely lost, even if it was blocked by an oppressive "wall."

The insistent [anaphora](#) ("My hands! / My dark hands!") and sudden exclamation points (the first in the poem) can be read in several ways. This might be a [tone](#) of excitement, anger, resolve, desperation, or a combination of all these. In any case, the speaker is clearly working themselves up to the challenge of smashing "the wall."

LINES 28-33

*Help me to shatter this darkness,
To smash this night,
To break this shadow
Into a thousand lights of sun,
Into a thousand whirling dreams
Of sun!*

The poem ends on a note of renewed energy and determination. The speaker continues to talk to their own "hands," in a combination of [apostrophe](#) and an address to the self. Using emphatic [repetition](#), including [anaphora](#), they urge their hands:

Help me to shatter **this** darkness,
To smash **this** night,
To break **this** shadow
Into a thousand lights of sun,
Into a thousand whirling dreams
Of sun!

This forceful repetition helps carry the poem to its emotional [climax](#). The speaker declares in several ways that they wish to "shatter" ("smash"/"break") the "darkness" ("night"/"shadow") of racism.

Moreover, they wish to step through into a vision that has expanded far beyond the single "sun" of their initial "dream" (lines 5-6). Now, they hope to encounter "a thousand lights of sun, / [...] a thousand whirling dreams / Of sun!" Their new ambition seems to involve not only improving their own life but also "smash[ing]" the racial barrier entirely. The "thousand [...] dreams," with their "whirling" ecstasy, may suggest a utopian vision of a world completely free of racism—a world in which *everyone* can achieve *all* their highest ambitions.

Because this is an anti-racist poem, there may be some added complexity or [irony](#) in the fact that "darkness," here, has negative [connotations](#) and "light[]" positive ones. Crucially, though, the speaker wants to shatter the barrier *dividing* light from darkness. They want to end the "Shadow" of racial stigma, knocking down the artificial system (the "wall") that attaches false significance to whiteness/Blackness in the first place. The closing exclamation point, along with the closing word "sun" (symbol of happiness, vitality, universality, etc.), drives home the joyous optimism of the speaker's vision.



SYMBOLS



THE WALL

The speaker describes a "wall" that "Rose slowly, / Slowly, / Between me and my dream" (lines 7-10).

This wall [symbolizes](#) the social barriers they face as a Black person in a racist society. A wall is something built by humans, not something natural, so the symbolism implies that racial barriers, too, are unnatural and artificial.

As the title suggests, the wall rose as the speaker "Grew Older" and more aware of racism. It blocked them from their "dream"—which once shed a hopeful "light"—and cast a [metaphorical](#) "Shadow" over their lives. The speaker connects this shadow (of unhappiness, frustration, etc.) with the racial/social category of Blackness:

Shadow.
I am black.

In other words, the shadow arises from the recognition that their society defines them as Black and treats Black people as second-class citizens (or worse).

Tormenting as the "wall" is, the speaker remains determined to "Break through" it. They attempt to summon the strength to smash through the racial barrier, and to "Find [their] dream!" regardless of how white society treats or defines them.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-16:** "And then the wall rose, / Rose slowly, / Slowly, / Between me and my dream. / Rose slowly, slowly, / Dimming, / Hiding, / The light of my dream. / Rose until it touched the sky,— / The wall."
- **Line 22:** "Only the thick wall."
- **Line 26:** "Break through the wall!"



POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The poem [repeats](#) many key words and phrases, both as a way of highlighting its main themes and as a way of loosely structuring its [free verse](#).

Take the word "dream," for example. It appears seven times in the poem's 33 lines (including once in the plural: "dreams," line 33). In all but one of those instances, the poem further emphasizes it by placing it at the end of a line.

("Dream"/"dreams" ends so many lines that it's almost a [refrain](#)!) In five instances, it occurs as part of the phrase "my dream," and in two instances, as part of the phrase "the light of my dream."

This constant repetition conveys how important—in fact, essential—the "dream" is to the speaker's imagination. It's something deeply personal, a guiding "light" in their lives, even as the "wall" of racism blocks them from attaining it. This "wall" is itself mentioned four times; so is the fact that it "rose" up, and the oppressive "shadow" it casts. These repetitions illustrate the maddening persistence of the racial barrier.

Meanwhile, "light"/"lights" appears three times, indicating that the gleam of hope hasn't completely vanished from the speaker's life. (Since shadows are dark and light is, well, light, there's also some complex racial [symbolism](#) at play here. In breaking down the wall, the speaker seems to want to erase the light/dark distinction entirely, or end racial divisions altogether.)

Some repeated words/phrases fall at the beginnings of successive lines and/or sentences, creating [anaphora](#). Examples include "Rose" in lines 11 and 15, "Only the" in lines 22 and 23, "My" in lines 24 and 25, "To" in lines 29 and 30, and "Into a thousand" in lines 31 and 32. Other repeated words/phrases fall at the ends of lines: "dream"/"dreams" (lines 2, 6, 10, 14, 27, and 32), "me" (lines 4, 20, and 21), "sun" (lines 5, 31, and 33), "slowly" (lines 8, 9, and 11), "wall" (lines 16, 22, and 26), "shadow" (lines 17, 19, 23, and 30), and "hands" (lines 24 and 25).

Some of these repetitions emphasize key themes (e.g., the "wall" of oppression) or convey emotion (such as the excitement of "Into a thousand lights of sun, / Into a thousand whirling dreams / Of sun!"). More broadly, by starting and ending so many lines with identical phrases, the poet adds a dash of structure to an otherwise free-form poem. There's no set [meter](#), [rhyme scheme](#), or [stanza](#) form here, but the poem does keep circling back to the same words and ideas.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "my dream"

- **Line 4:** "me"
- **Line 5:** "sun"
- **Line 6:** "My dream"
- **Line 7:** "rose"
- **Line 8:** "Rose slowly"
- **Line 9:** "Slowly"
- **Line 10:** "my dream"
- **Line 11:** "Rose slowly," "slowly"
- **Line 14:** "The light of my dream"
- **Line 15:** "Rose"
- **Line 16:** "The wall"
- **Line 17:** "Shadow"
- **Line 19:** "shadow"
- **Line 20:** "the light of my dream," "me"
- **Line 21:** "me"
- **Line 22:** "Only the," "wall"
- **Line 23:** "Only the," "shadow"
- **Line 24:** "My," "hands"
- **Line 25:** "My," "hands"
- **Line 26:** "the wall"
- **Line 27:** "dream"
- **Line 28:** "to," "this"
- **Line 29:** "To," "this"
- **Line 30:** "To," "this," "shadow"
- **Line 31:** "Into a thousand," "lights," "of sun"
- **Line 32:** "Into a thousand," "dreams"
- **Line 33:** "Of sun"

END-STOPPED LINE

Nearly every line in the poem is [end-stopped](#). The only two exceptions come toward the end of the poem, in the [enjambments](#) at the ends of lines 30 and 32.

Hughes may have used this effect for several reasons:

1. First, it gives this [free verse](#) poem a certain structural logic in the absence of [meter](#) or [rhyme](#). For the most part, the [line breaks](#) come at the end of a grammatical phrase, whether that phrase is punctuated by a comma, dash, period, or some other mark.
2. Second, the way punctuation checks, or closes off, each line seems to mirror the way the "wall" of racism closes off the speaker's opportunities. In other words, it makes the language feel tightly controlled rather than free-flowing.
3. Finally, when those two enjambed lines appear at the end, it suggests that the wall may be cracking a little. The pattern briefly breaks, the language flows a bit more freely, and even the end-stopping punctuation gets more vigorous and joyous. (Five out of the final ten lines, including the very last line, end with exclamation points—a punctuation mark that hadn't appeared anywhere else in the poem!)

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-29
- Line 31
- Line 33

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The poem develops an [extended metaphor](#) involving a wall, sun, and shadow. In an initial [simile](#) (lines 3-6), the speaker compares their dream to "a sun" shining brightly "In front of" them. In other words, their dream—their aspirations or ideal life—seemed comforting, sustaining, beautiful, and practically right there for the taking.

As the simile extends into a metaphor, a "wall" goes up between the speaker and their dream. This wall (a [symbol](#) of the color line or race barrier: see the Symbols section) cuts the speaker off from "The light of [their] dream." In other words, the obstacle of racism prevents them from realizing their ambitions. As a result, they feel as if a "Shadow" has fallen over their life: the shadow of oppression, frustration, unhappiness, and so on. This shadow coincides with the realization that, by white society's standards, "I am black" and therefore inferior. In fact, the shadow seems synonymous with the social category of "black[ness]."

At first, the speaker seems resigned to this situation: "I lie down in the shadow." By poem's end, however, they feel a renewed desire to "Break through the wall!" and reach the "sun" still waiting on the other side. In fact, that sun has turned into "a thousand lights of sun," representing "a thousand whirling dreams." It seems that oppression hasn't extinguished their ambitions; if anything, it's expanded their ambitions a thousandfold. By now, they may even dream of destroying racism itself. They seek the strength to "shatter this darkness" and "smash this night"—that is, demolish the artificial barriers imposed by racial categories.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-33

APOSTROPHE

The final [stanza](#) of the poem contains an unusual kind of [apostrophe](#). The speaker addresses their own "hands," which can't literally respond, of course—at least not as independent entities. (But since their hands are part of them, this device could be described as a cross between an apostrophe and an address to the self.)

The speaker urges their "dark hands" to "Break through the wall" of oppression facing them. Essentially, they're summoning their strength and willpower, as a Black person, to smash through their society's racial barriers in any way possible. They do this by addressing their hands as if they were separate

agents, whom they hope will "Help me to shatter this darkness." This phrasing suggests that the speaker has felt *disconnected* from their own body, or from their own inner source of strength. The society that judges them based on their appearance seems to have alienated them from themselves, making them feel weak, discouraged, and listless. By apostrophizing their hands, then, they're trying to get back in touch with their own strength—to overcome an *internal* division that society's *external* barriers have created.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 24-33:** "My hands! / My dark hands! / Break through the wall! / Find my dream! / Help me to shatter this darkness, / To smash this night, / To break this shadow / Into a thousand lights of sun, / Into a thousand whirling dreams / Of sun!"

**VOCABULARY**

- Dimming** (Line 12) - Making less bright or intense; darkening.
- Black** (Line 18) - Here implying both "covered in darkness" and "Black" (i.e., of African descent).
- Whirling** (Line 32) - Spinning wildly, dancing joyously. (Here describing the passionate nature of the speaker's "dreams.")

**FORM, METER, & RHYME****FORM**

The poem contains five stanzas of uneven length (ranging from two to ten lines). The lines vary in length as well (from two to eleven syllables). It's a [free verse](#) poem, so it has no [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#).

Hughes wrote "As I Grew Older" during a period when free verse was still considered experimental; it had come into vogue in English-language poetry during the previous decade. His use of this technique signals his openness to "modern" styles, as well as his subversive or irreverent stance toward traditional styles. The *poet's* desire to create new kinds of poetry seems to align with the *speaker's* desire to create a new kind of society (the non-racist kind).

In particular, Hughes is celebrated for adapting some of the techniques of Black music—including jazz and the blues—into English-language poetry. Sometimes he did this by loosening his meter or using unpredictable rhyme patterns. In this poem, he riffs on a few key words, including "dream," "sun," "wall," and "shadow," repeating them over and over in different contexts and in lines of varying lengths. Often, though not always, these key words fall at the ends of lines.

This kind of loose, seemingly improvised [repetition](#)-with-variations is characteristic of jazz music, and it's one of the elements that made Hughes's poetry distinctive even in an era full of poetic innovation. (More broadly, Hughes riffs on certain key words and themes, including "dreams" and "black[ness]," across poems and entire books! See the Context section of this guide for more.)

METER

"As I Grew Older" is a [free verse](#) poem, so it has no [meter](#).

Hughes wrote in both free verse and metrical forms throughout his career. His style was generally innovative and experimental, influenced by Black American musical traditions such as jazz and the blues. ("As I Grew Older" was published in his collection *The Weary Blues*.) As part of that experimentation, he often loosened meter or abandoned it altogether, in favor of language that feels spontaneous and organic (but in fact is carefully crafted!). Here, the terse, free-form lines convey a sense of emotional urgency, as if the speaker is too anguished and frustrated to say anything conventionally "poetic."

RHYME SCHEME

As a [free verse](#) poem, "As I Grew Older" has no [rhyme scheme](#). It does, however, repeat several words a number of times at the ends of lines: "dream"/"dreams" (lines 2, 6, 10, 14, 27, and 32), "me" (lines 4, 20, and 21), "sun" (lines 5, 31, and 33), "slowly" (lines 8, 9, and 11), "wall" (lines 16, 22, and 26), and "shadow" (lines 17, 19, 23, and 30). Also, both lines 24 and 25 end with "hands."

In fact, *most* of the lines in the poem end with one of these [repetitions](#). The effect is something like identical rhyme, although some of the repetitions occur too far apart for the "rhyme" to be noticeable. And, again, there's no formal pattern or scheme involved. Instead, Hughes might have a musical model in mind, as he often does: the kind of repetition-with-variations found in jazz. He's loosely *riffing* on these thematically important words—using them in different contexts and in lines of varying length, but returning to them repeatedly to emphasize their significance.



SPEAKER

The poem doesn't provide many specific details about its speaker (name, gender, location, etc.). But it establishes, largely through [symbol](#) and [metaphor](#), that the speaker is a Black person in a racist society.

In line 18, the speaker says simply, "I am black." This is a statement of racial identity, though not a completely straightforward one: the speaker has just described themselves as being "Shadow[ed]" by the "wall" that's risen between them and their dreams. So "I am black" means both that they are Black in a racial sense and that they are darkened by this

metaphorical shadow (of oppression, etc.). Later, the speaker mentions their "dark hands," in another reference to their dark skin.

In this context, it's clear that the "wall" they face is (primarily, at least) the barrier of racial discrimination. They wish to "Break through" this barrier and achieve the "thousand whirling dreams" that wait on the other side. In urging their own "hands" to do this, they seem to be summoning the strength to fight oppression and achieve social change.

The only other information about the speaker comes in the title: "As I Grew Older." It's not clear exactly how old this speaker is, just that they're mature enough to understand the nature and extent of their oppression. Otherwise, the speaker is a somewhat generalized figure; their frustration is representative of the general plight of Black people in a racist world. The lack of specifics allows a wider variety of readers, particularly Black readers, to identify with the speaker's situation.



SETTING

The poem contains what seem to be a few sparse [setting](#) details: a "wall," "sky," and "sun." However, these details turn out to be [symbolic](#), representing the racial barriers the speaker faces and the dazzling "dreams" that wait on the other side.

Unlike many of Hughes's poems, then, this one isn't tied to a particular location; it's a more generalized portrait of oppression, frustration, and perseverance. At the same time, since Hughes was a Black man writing in early 20th-century America, the *poet's* cultural setting is worth noting (see Context section for more).



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Langston Hughes was a leading writer of the Harlem Renaissance, an early-20th-century artistic, intellectual, and social movement centered in the largely Black Harlem neighborhood of New York City. Hughes published "As I Grew Older" in *The Weary Blues* (1926), his debut volume, as the movement was flourishing. In addition, the Harlem Renaissance overlapped with and contributed to the literary Modernist movement, which began in the 1910s, gained momentum after World War I, and introduced a wave of poetic experimentation.

Hughes's poetry, including "As I Grew Older," both influenced and was influenced by these movements, as well as by the broader social currents of the period. For example, the Harlem Renaissance brought an explosion of musical innovation, particularly in jazz and the blues. Hughes strove to adapt the techniques of these genres into his poetry. *The Weary Blues*

contains, in addition to the famous [title piece](#), such music-themed poems as "Jazzonia," "The Cat and the Saxophone," and "Harlem Nightclub." (It also contains an entire section called "Dream Variations": proof that dreams were a central concern of his poetry from the start.) The [free verse](#) of "As I Grew Older" reflects Hughes's passion for innovative musical and verse technique.

"As I Grew Older" is one of many dream-related poems Hughes wrote throughout his career. A famous example is "[Harlem](#)" (1951), which begins, "What happens to a dream deferred? // Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?" and ends, "Or does it *explode*?" Notice the parallel between the "explo[sion]" here and the "smash[ing]"/"shatter[ing]" at the end of "As I Grew Older." Both poems suggest that thwarted dreams can cause a bottling-up of anger and frustration that eventually bursts out. At the same time, the "whirling dreams" in "As I Grew Older" echo the ecstatic, hopeful language of Hughes's "[Dream Variations](#)," whose speaker imagines "whirl[ing] and [...] danc[ing] / Till the white day is done."

Hughes's poetry is closely associated with the dreams and realities of Black Americans in particular, as well as the broader problem of the "American Dream." It profoundly influenced many marginalized writers during and after Hughes's lifetime, among them playwright Lorraine Hansberry ([A Raisin in the Sun](#)) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (some of whose speeches [drew on](#) phrases and ideas in Hughes's work).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Both the Harlem Renaissance and Modernism channeled the social conflicts of Hughes's age. With daring candor, Hughes and other Black artists of the period expressed the frustration, anger, and sorrow of life in a racist society.

During the era when "As I Grew Older" appeared, the southern U.S. was still segregated, the Ku Klux Klan was resurgent, and the Civil Rights movement was decades away. Also far on the horizon was the modern LGBTQ rights movement, and many scholars believe Hughes was a gay man who chose not to risk openness about his sexuality. A few years after *The Weary Blues* was published, the country sank into the Great Depression, and Hughes's commitment to radical left-wing politics deepened throughout the 1930s.

In short, "As I Grew Older" attacks prejudice and oppression as part of a larger body of work—including Hughes's other famous dream poems—that confronts these themes repeatedly. The poem's attitude toward "my dream" reflects the experience of a writer whose country often belittled, blocked, or crushed the dreams of people like himself.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [The Poem Aloud](#) — Listen to a reading of "As I Grew Older," complete with musical accompaniment. (<https://youtu.be/Q9gh9QA4eAw?t=52>)
- [The Poet's Life and Work](#) — Read a short biography of Hughes, plus other Hughes poems, at Poets.org. (<https://poets.org/poet/langston-hughes>)
- [An Introduction to the Harlem Renaissance](#) — An introduction to the literary movement with which Hughes is closely associated. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/145704/an-introduction-to-the-harlem-renaissance>)
- [A Hughes Video](#) — Watch a short biographical film about Langston Hughes. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inP76rkYUso>)
- [A Hughes Documentary](#) — Watch a 2002 film about Hughes's life and times. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxMr46IUIDk>)
- [Hughes on "The Racial Mountain"](#) — Read one of Hughes's most famous commentaries on race and literature, published the same year as *The Weary Blues* (1926). (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69395/the-negro-artist-and-the-racial-mountain>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LANGSTON HUGHES POEMS

- [Cross](#)
- [Daybreak in Alabama](#)
- [Democracy](#)
- [Dreams](#)
- [Dream Variations](#)
- [Harlem](#)
- [I, Too](#)
- [Let America Be America Again](#)
- [Mother to Son](#)
- [Night Funeral in Harlem](#)
- [The Ballad of the Landlord](#)
- [Theme for English B](#)
- [The Negro Speaks of Rivers](#)
- [The Weary Blues](#)



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