Democracy

SUMMARY

This society will never become a democracy—not now, not this year, not ever—if we are afraid to demand anything less than full equality.

I have the same rights as anybody else. I should be able to stand tall like any other man and claim this country as my own.

I get so weary from hearing people say that we should be patient and wait for change to come or that things will change in the future. Freedom won't do me any good when I'm dead. I can't survive on some abstract idea of freedom in the future.

Freedom is a powerful seed that has been planted in the ground out of a vital, urgent need.

I live in this country, too. I want equality and freedom, just like you.

THEMES

RACIAL JUSTICE, FREEDOM, AND DEMOCRACY

Langston Hughes wrote "Democracy" in 1949, at a time when Black Americans continued to face intense racism, disenfranchisement, and segregation. The speaker argues that true democracy can't exist in the U.S. until *everyone* is free and equal, and that *everyone* needs to participate in this collective struggle for change. Justice delayed is justice denied, the speaker says; equality and freedom are basic human rights that Black Americans deserve right now.

The poem makes clear that a society that denies Black Americans such rights can't call itself a democracy. The speaker thus describes democracy as a future that has not yet arrived: "Democracy will not come," the speaker says, implying that it's not here yet.

The speaker also notes that unlike the "other fellow"—that is, white Americans—the speaker can't yet "own the land." This is a reference to the fact that, at the time the poem was written, pervasive voter suppression and racist violence effectively denied Black Americans the right to vote, and thus to have a say in their country's future. Such a system, the speaker argues, is hardly democratic.

To defer racial justice, the speaker continues, is to deprive Black Americans of their basic human rights. Replying to those who tell Black Americans that tomorrow is "another day" (in other words, to be patient and to reign in their demands for equality), the speaker says, "I cannot live on tomorrow's bread." Freedom, the speaker suggests, is integral to life; it is as necessary as "bread" to survive—and nobody, of course, can sustain themselves on food they haven't even received yet.

Thus, every day that passes *without* equality is an injustice, and the speaker's urgent, insistent tone reinforces this sense of immediate necessity: the speaker, along with all Black Americans, deserve equality and freedom, *right now*. The country must actively reckon with this injustice, the speaker says, because democracy won't arrive through "compromise and fear." In other words, the U.S. can only *become* a democracy through a courageous social movement for change.

The speaker then compares freedom to a "strong seed" that has been "[p]lanted," an image that frames freedom as something that must be cultivated and tended to. It's possible to build a true democracy, this image suggests, but only through hard work and dedication. And at the very end of the poem, the speaker addresses readers directly, making it clear that nobody can be neutral when it comes to putting in this hard work toward racial justice and democracy. The poem thus asks readers to consider their own role in this struggle for change.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Democracy will not ...
... compromise and fear.

The speaker says that democracy will never arrive—that the United States will never be a truly democratic country—if people "compromise" or are afraid. In other words, the speaker implies that the United States is not *yet* a democracy and that it can only *become* a democracy through a courageous and unyielding activist movement.

Historical context is important for understanding these opening lines and, in fact, the poem as a whole. Langston Hughes wrote the poem in 1949, in the early days of the Civil Rights movement. At this time, thousands of Black Americans had fought to defend American democracy in World War II. At home, though, they continued to face pervasive segregation, disenfranchisement, and legal or extralegal racist violence.

Additionally, although Black Americans legally had the right to vote, extreme voter suppression and violence made it effectively impossible for them to exercise this right. The speaker of the poem makes it clear that such an unequal society

is *not* a democracy, and that Black Americans and their allies must be bold in their demands for equality and freedom, refusing to concede these basic rights.

The speaker's reference to the passage of time—"Democracy will not come / Today, this year / Nor ever"—is also important within this context. Almost a century after Emancipation, Black Americans had yet to experience legitimate freedom, racial equality, and opportunity in the United States. The speaker reminds readers that this injustice could potentially go on forever and, for that matter, that it has already gone on for many decades. Listing these increments of time, the speaker uses asyndeton, omitting conjunctions between "today," "this year," and "nor ever" in a way that makes it seem like this list could go on forever—just like the injustice itself.

The way this sentence appears on the page also has a powerful effect. For the first three lines of the poem, readers must imagine the possibility that democracy "will not come" at all. This introduces a sense of urgency in the poem right at the outset: this social movement to bring about democracy, the speaker makes clear, must happen now. The enjambments at the ends of the lines, between "come / Today" and "this year / Nor ever" heighten this sense of urgency, propelling readers over the line breaks before the definitive full stop at the stanza's end.

These lines also use patterns of sound to emphasize their meaning. For example, the alliterative hard /c/ sounds and consonant /m/ sounds spotlight the words "come" and "compromise," calling attention to the idea that democracy won't "come" on its own—and that it definitely won't come about by compromising or conceding.

LINES 5-9

I have as ...
... own the land.

The speaker addresses the current state of inequality and asserts that he has the same rights as anyone else. Specifically, the speaker says that he has "as much right / As the other fellow." The phrase "other fellow" refers to white Americans, and the speaker makes it clear that white Americans are just "other fellow[s]"—other people—who are no better than him.

The speaker goes on to say that, just like white Americans, he should be able to "stand" on his "own two feet." In other words, he should be able to stand tall, without fear of racist violence or retaliation. He also says he should be able to "own the land." This could be interpreted as meaning that he should be able to vote, and in voting, have some say over the direction of the country as a whole.

The phrase "own the land" could also allude to the 1865 promise made to Black Americans that upon Emancipation they would be given "40 acres and a mule"—a piece of land and a mule with which to work it— as a way to begin an independent life. However, this promise was never honored, meaning that many formerly enslaved people were forced to work in indentured servitude—a situation not dissimilar to slavery.

Finally, the phrase "own the land" invokes the discriminatory money lending practices and redlining of the time, which made it virtually impossible for Black Americans to buy a house. All of these forms of systemic racism, then, have historically prevented Black Americans from having any kind of ownership over "the land," and the speaker implies that it's high time for this to change.

Like the first stanza, this stanza features just one sentence. And as in the preceding stanza, the line endings include multiple instances of enjambment:

I have as much right
As the other fellow has
To stand
On my two feet
And own the land.

These enjambments propel readers forward, reinforcing the sense of urgency in the poem. At the same time, the line endings create moments of pause, forcing readers to take time to fully consider the speaker's points.

This stanza is also fairly assonant, since the /a/ sound appears in "have," "as," "has," "stand," and "land." These open vowel sounds create music in the poem and link the words together, reinforcing the idea that the speaker should be able to "stand" on the "land" as an equal. The end rhyme between "stand" and "land" also heightens this sound pattern and connects the idea of standing tall with the land, or the country, as a whole.

By this point, the poem has featured two end rhymes: in the first stanza with "year" and "fear," and in this stanza with "stand" and "land." However, the poem doesn't follow a fixed rhyme scheme. Instead, these end rhymes create passing, unexpected bursts of music, leading to a somewhat syncopated effect that recalls the rhythms and variations found in jazz and blues—musical forms that emerged out of the Black community and informed Hughes's poetry.

LINES 10-12

I tire so ...
... is another day.

The speaker replies to those who have told Black Americans to wait patiently for change to come. The speaker says that he "tire[s] so"—or is weary and frustrated—with hearing that he should let things "take their course," and that tomorrow is "another day." In other words, the speaker is sick of being told that Black Americans should wait longer for equal rights and that maybe equality will come "tomorrow" or on its own. As the speaker noted in the beginning of the poem, democracy won't arrive automatically, and this injustice has already gone on for

generations.

The poem shifts to end-stopped lines at this point, dramatically slowing readers down. In fact, after the comma at the end of line 10, the next two lines are full-stopped (meaning each coincides with the end of a sentence). This brings readers to a complete pause at the end of both lines, creating a clipped, almost staccato rhythm.

By slowing the poem down like this, the end-stopped lines convey the frustration and exhaustion that the speaker feels. They also call attention to the many hollow promises the speaker has heard, giving each statement ("Let things take their course" and "Tomorrow is another day") a terse, somewhat skeptical tone—a tone that hints at how cliché, overused, and ultimately empty they are. People might say "Tomorrow is another day," but as the speaker noted at the beginning of the poem, one day leads to the next, and this delay could easily go on forever.

The sibilant alliteration in "so" and "say" reinforces the sense that the speaker has heard these things over and over again, to the point that he now "tire[s] so" at hearing them. The end rhyme of "say" and "day" also emphasizes the fact that nothing will truly change—today or tomorrow—by listening to what these "people say." Change will only come through a true social movement demanding racial justice, and the speaker indicates that the time to act is now.

LINES 13-14

I do not ...
... on tomorrow's bread.

The speaker continues to reply to those who have told Black Americans to wait for change. Freedom, the speaker makes clear, will be no use to him when he is dead: Black Americans need and deserve equality *now*.

To further illustrate this point, the speaker reminds readers that he "cannot live on tomorrow's bread." Obviously, *nobody* can survive on the mere promise of food that may or may not appear at some unspecified time in the future. Likewise, one can't live on a dream of equality that is constantly deferred. Here, then, "bread" becomes a metaphor for equal rights and freedom, which the speaker suggests are as necessary as food to survive.

Repetition in these lines also emphasizes this sense of necessity. The speaker begins line 13 by saying, "I do not need [...]." Then, in the next line, he repeats a variation of this phrase, saying, "I cannot live [...]." Both phrases begin with "I," an anaphora carried over from the phrase "I tire so of hearing people say," which appears at the very beginning of the stanza. This anaphora reminds readers that the speaker isn't just talking about vague, abstract ideas—he's talking about his *own* experience and his urgent need for freedom.

Meanwhile, the parallel structure of the sentences, each of which occupies a single line, drives home the speaker's point with definition and clarity. This parallelism also calls attention to the speaker's repeated use of present tense verbs, in such instances as "tire," "need," and "live." These present tense verbs remind the reader that equality can't be delayed any longer, and that the speaker, like all Black Americans, need and deserve these equal rights *right now*.

The end rhyme of "dead" and "bread" also contributes to the speaker's urgent tone: without the "bread" of equality and freedom, the poem suggests, one is not truly alive. Finally, the assonant long /e/ sounds in "need" and "freedom" spotlight these words, reinforcing the idea that equality and freedom are basic human needs that cannot be delayed.

LINES 15-18

Freedom ...
... a great need.

The speaker compares freedom to a "seed" that has been "[p]lanted" out of a "great need." This metaphor reinforces the sense that freedom is like sustenance and, as such, is necessary for a person's survival. Just as a seed grows into wheat and is then made into "bread," the speaker suggests that freedom and equality must be *cultivated* in order to satisfy a fundamental human need—a need so "great" that it's comparable to eating.

Within the short lines of this stanza, the speaker repeats two important words from the preceding stanza: "freedom" and "need":

> Freedom
> Is a strong seed
> Planted
> In a great need.

The use of these words recalls the speaker's statement in line 13: "I do not need my freedom when I'm dead." By bringing these words back once more in this stanza, the speaker further highlights the notion that "freedom" isn't a luxury or privilege, but a *necessity*.

This stanza also features the assonant /ee/ sound, which appears in both "freedom" and "need," as well as in "seed." This links the three words together. Meanwhile, the end rhyme between "need" and "seed" imbues the words with even more emphasis. The combined use of repetition, assonance, and rhyme thus spotlights the idea that freedom is vital and necessary to life.

The speaker also uses enjambment to create a smooth but somewhat syncopated rhythm in this stanza. Lines 15 and 17 each consist of just one word: "Freedom" and "Planted." Lines 16 and 18, on the other hand, each contain four words; they also subtly parallel each other, since the phrase "a strong seed" gently mirrors the phrase "a great need." Combined with the

fluid enjambment and the fluctuation between shorter and longer lines, this gives the speaker's language a pleasingly flexible, musical sound.

The sibilant alliteration in "strong seed" also calls attention to the strength of this "seed," implying that, once planted, it will only continue to grow. Likewise, the consonant /n/ sounds in "planted" and "need" reinforce the idea that people must work for freedom because it is essential to survival.

LINES 19-21

I live here, ...
... Just as you.

The poem ends with three short, direct lines, in which the speaker reaffirms his argument and addresses the reader directly. "I live here, too," the speaker says, subtly echoing the phrase "I cannot live" from earlier in the poem. The assertion that the speaker *currently* lives in the United States reminds readers that this need for freedom and equality is urgent and immediate. As someone living in a racist country, the speaker can't live on the "bread" of tomorrow—he can't wait around for empty promises of future equality.

The phrase "I live here, too" also implies that white people often see the United States as belonging strictly to them. The word "too" hints at this, as if the speaker has to remind racist Americans that the country isn't supposed to cater only to white people. To further illustrate this idea, the speaker continues by saying: "I want freedom / Just as you." Between the line "I live here, too" and the line "I want freedom," the word "I" creates an anaphora, thus reminding readers that the poem isn't just about hazy, abstract ideas surrounding equality, but about the speaker's *personal* experience.

There's an end rhyme that occurs between "too" and "you," giving these final lines a conclusive, assertive sound. Meanwhile, the speaker repeats "freedom" for the third time in the poem. This consistent repetition reinforces the importance of racial justice and freedom.

Finally, the apostrophe in the line "Just as you" can be read in several ways. First, if readers are white, this address asks them to consider the privilege they have and if they will deny equal rights to other human beings. In a broader sense, this direct address can also be read as an invitation for readers to join the struggle for change. This brings home the urgency and immediacy of the poem's message, as the speaker asks readers to join him in this collective movement for democracy and change.

SYMBOLS

THE LAND

The "land" in the poem literally refers to the United States, but also more broadly symbolizes the right to self-determination, security, and opportunity. When the speaker says he has "as much right" as anyone else to "own the land," he's saying that he deserves, as much as anyone else, to have a sense of ownership of his country. Owning the land connotes feeling rooted and powerful; instead of being at the country's mercy, he should have a meaningful say in the country's direction—and thus in the direction of his own life.

When the speaker later says that "Freedom / Is a strong seed / Planted / In a great need," he builds on the symbolic resonance of the land. The land evokes ideas of rootedness, belonging, and self-determination; the fact that freedom is a "strong seed" that's implicitly "[p]lanted in the land thus suggests rootedness, belonging, and self-determination are prerequisites for freedom and equality.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "the land"
- **Lines 15-18:** "Freedom / Is a strong seed / Planted / In a great need."

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

"Democracy" uses repetition to emphasize important words and ideas in the poem. For example, the speaker repeats the words "tomorrow" in lines 12 and 14, saying:

> Tomorrow is another day.
> I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.
> I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.

This highlights the fact that white people in positions of power often expect Black Americans to wait for equal rights, constantly insisting that "tomorrow" will be a better day. At the same time, this repetition underscores how cruel this expectation is, since, as the speaker notes, he could not possibly live on "tomorrow's bread."

The poem also uses diacope, as the speaker repeats "freedom" several times throughout the second half of the poem. In fact, the speaker alternates between repeating "tomorrow" and "freedom" in lines 12 through 15:

> Tomorrow is another day.
> I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.

I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.
Freedom

This alternating repetition helps convey the idea that freedom will never arrive by simply waiting for "tomorrow": instead, a courageous social movement must demand equality *now*. In another instance of diacope, the speaker repeats the word "need" in lines 13 and 18 ("I do not [...] I'm dead" and "In a [...] need"). This accentuates that freedom and equality are basic human *needs* that cannot be deferred any longer—a message that the speaker drives home by repeating "freedom" a final time in the second-to-last line, saying, "I want freedom."

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "Tomorrow"
- **Line 13:** "need," "freedom"
- **Line 14:** "tomorrow's"
- **Line 15:** "Freedom"
- **Line 18:** "need"
- **Line 20:** "freedom"

ANAPHORA

In addition to the other forms of repetition in "Democracy," anaphora runs throughout the poem. The speaker repeats the word "I" at the beginning of multiple lines, calling attention to the fact that the lack of true racial justice in the United States affects him on a direct, personal level.

For example, consider the following lines, all of which begin with "I" statements:

- Line 5: "I have as much right"
- Line 10: "I tire so of hearing people say,"
- Line 13: "I do not need my freedom when I'm dead."
- Line 14: "I cannot live on tomorrow's bread."
- Line 19: "I live here, too."
- Line 20: "I want freedom"

This use of anaphora encourages readers to really consider the adverse effects of racism and injustice on the speaker's life. The poem isn't concerned with vague, abstract ideas about freedom; rather, it's concerned with the impact of racism on actual people. By using so many "I" statements, the speaker ensures that readers will see the lack of racial justice in the United States as something that has tangible adverse effects on individuals like himself. This, the poem implies, is why the need for change is so urgent: actual lives are at stake.

Some of the poem's anaphora also leads to subtle forms of parallelism, like in lines 13 and 14, when the speaker says:

I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.
I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.

The parallel structure of "I do not need" and "I cannot live" adds emphasis to the speaker's point that vague promises about future freedom and equality do him no meaningful good in the present.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "I have"
- **Line 10:** "I tire"
- **Line 13:** "I do not need"
- **Line 14:** "I cannot live"
- **Line 19:** "I live"
- **Line 20:** "I want"

METAPHOR

The speaker uses two important metaphors to communicate the urgency of his message. First, he asserts that he "cannot live on tomorrow's bread." Here, bread becomes a metaphor for freedom and equality. Of course, no one could survive on some abstract food they might have in the future, and the speaker makes clear that, in the same way, "tomorrow's" freedom is no use to him now.

This metaphor helps convey the idea that freedom and equality are essential to life. Just like bread is one of the most basic kinds of food, the speaker suggests that democracy and freedom are basic human rights. To defer freedom to Black Americans, the poem suggests, is like denying people the food they need to survive.

The speaker builds on this metaphor in the fourth stanza ("Freedom [...] need") by comparing freedom to a "strong seed / Planted / In a great need." This presents freedom as something that must be cultivated—something that won't just come about on its own. While white people in the United States more or less take their freedom for granted, Black people—the poem implies—unfortunately don't even *have* complete freedom, which is why it's something that must be cultivated and tended to like a seedling.

This metaphor also subtly links up with the bread metaphor, since a seed of wheat could someday be harvested and made into bread. Once again, then, the speaker frames freedom as a necessity for survival, something that is fundamental to life and must be rigorously maintained.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "I cannot live on tomorrow's bread."
- **Lines 15-18:** "Freedom / Is a strong seed / Planted / In a great need."

ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses enjambment throughout to create momentum and emphasis. For example, the first line ends with enjambment, as the speaker says, "Democracy will not come / Today, [...]." Before moving on to the next line, readers are left with the possibility that "Democracy will not come" *at all*. This enjambment, then, helps convey the poem's urgency, letting readers know at the outset that democracy won't arrive automatically.

Enjambment also calls attention to particularly important words in the second-to-last stanza:

> Freedom
> Is a strong seed
> Planted
> In a great need.

There are few moments of brief suspense in this stanza, as the speaker leaves readers hanging after words like "freedom" and "planted"—these words, after all, stand alone in their respective lines, highlighting them in a way that calls attention to the metaphor comparing "freedom" to a "seed" that must be "planted" and cultivated. On an even simpler level, the use of enjambment in this stanza simply gives the poem a feeling of forward momentum, as if readers are falling from line to line.

Although enjambment appears prominently throughout the poem, the speaker *also* uses end-stopped lines, which slow down the pace in certain sections. For example, the third stanza ("I tire so [...] tomorrow's bread") consists of five end-stopped lines, four of which are full stopped, as the line endings coincide with the ending of a sentence. These end-stopped lines appear when the speaker notes that Black Americans are often told to wait for change and racial justice. The end-stopped lines thus help convey the seemingly never-ending wait Black Americans have had to endure (and are *still* enduring) for racial justice and equality to become a reality.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "come / Today"
- **Lines 5-6:** "right / As"
- **Lines 6-7:** "has / To"
- **Lines 7-8:** "stand / On"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Freedom / Is"
- **Lines 16-17:** "seed / Planted"
- **Line 18:** "In"
- **Lines 20-21:** "freedom / Just"

CONSONANCE

The consonance in "Democracy" highlights important words and ideas in the poem. For instance, consider the hard /c/ and /m/ sounds in the first stanza:

> Democracy will not come
> [...]
> Through compromise [...]

This consonance lends the speaker's words a bold, authoritative tone and draws readers' attention to the idea that true democracy (i.e. freedom, equal rights, and justice) won't just come about on its own.

In the same stanza, the speaker repeats the /r/ sound:

> Today, this year
> Nor ever
> Through compromise and fear.

The repetition of the /r/ sound adds to the speaker's authoritative, somewhat aggrieved tone; one can almost even imagine that he's speaking through clenched teeth.

Similarly, line 11 features the sharp /c/ sound in a way that emphasizes just how ridiculous it is for someone to tell Black people to wait patiently for justice and equality:

> Let things take their course.

This is a hard, biting sound, and as this line brings out the speaker's exasperation. The /d/, /m/ and /n/ sound in lines 12 and 13, meanwhile, again add to the speaker's forceful tone:

> [...] day.
> I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.

The insistence on these sounds grants the speaker's words an authoritative, blunt quality, conveying the fact that he's tired of waiting for true freedom.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Democracy," "come"
- **Line 2:** "year"
- **Line 3:** "Nor ever"
- **Line 4:** "Through compromise," "fear"
- **Line 5:** "right"
- **Line 6:** "other"
- **Line 7:** "To stand"
- **Line 8:** "two feet"
- **Line 9:** "And own," "land"
- **Line 10:** "tire," "hearing"
- **Line 11:** "take," "course"
- **Line 12:** "Tomorrow," "day"
- **Line 13:** "do," "not need," "freedom," "dead"
- **Line 14:** "tomorrow's bread"
- **Line 15:** "Freedom"
- **Line 16:** "strong seed"

- **Line 17:** "Planted"
- **Line 18:** "need"

ASSONANCE

Like the consonance found in "Democracy," the poem's assonance calls attention to certain words and phrases. Consider, for example, the combination of the /o/ and /ay/ sounds in lines 9 through 12:

> And own the land.
> I tire so of hearing people say,
> Let things take their course.
> Tomorrow is another day.

All this assonance lends these lines a feeling of building, monotonous rhythm that reflects just how clichéd and emptied the speaker finds such phrases.

The assonance of line 13 then mixes with the line's intense consonance to make the speaker's rejection of such phrases all the more memorable:

> I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.

The /ee/ sound spotlights the words "need" and "freedom," emphasizing the idea that freedom is both a necessity and useless to a dead person.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "have as"
- **Line 6:** "has"
- **Line 9:** "own"
- **Line 10:** "so," "say"
- **Line 11:** "take"
- **Line 12:** "day"
- **Line 13:** "need," "freedom"
- **Line 15:** "Freedom"
- **Line 16:** "seed"
- **Line 18:** "need"

VOCABULARY

Democracy (Line 1) - A system of government in which representative officials are elected by a population of eligible voters. In the poem, "democracy" also refers more broadly to an equal and free society.

Compromise (Line 4) - To compromise means to bargain or concede in order to come to some kind of agreement.

Tire (Line 10) - To grow weary or exhausted.

Bread (Line 14) - In many societies, bread is viewed as the most basic, fundamental food. In Christian traditions, bread also represents the body of Christ. The speaker suggests that freedom and equality are as fundamental (and perhaps as sacred) as bread when it comes to survival.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem's 21 lines are arranged into five stanzas of varying length. The length of the lines in each stanza fluctuates, ranging from lines that contain only one or two words to lines that are much longer.

These variations give the poem an organic, somewhat spontaneous quality, lending a conversational tone to its overall flow. In a certain way, this helps the speaker use straightforward language that communicates the urgency of his message—it's as if the speaker's call for racial justice and equality is too immediate and pressing to follow some elaborate and arbitrary form.

The poem's *lack* of consistency also subtly emphasizes some of its most important ideas. For instance, the first stanza is four lines (a quatrain), but stanzas 2 and 3 each consist of five lines (cinquains). This lengthening of the stanzas occurs when the speaker notes that people often tell Black Americans to wait for change instead of demanding equality as soon as possible. It's arguable, then, that the longer stanzas reflect this sense of waiting, highlighting the fact that injustice continues to stretch on and on.

After the speaker *rejects* the idea of letting things "take their course," the stanzas get shorter again; the second to last stanza, for example, is four lines, and the closing stanza is only three. These shorter stanzas contain visually short, abrupt lines, giving them a quick, direct, and assertive quality. This shift to shorter stanzas helps communicate the speaker's sense of urgency, as his fast pace indicates that Black Americans deserve justice and equality right now.

METER

"Democracy" is written in free verse, meaning that it has no set meter. The speaker seems to engage the reader in direct, immediate conversation. There's no complex meter to distract from the poem's important message, which is that Black Americans deserve racial justice and true freedom right now.

Although the poem doesn't follow a fixed meter, it *does* include clusters of stresses that create emphasis and contribute to the speaker's urgent tone. For example, the fourth stanza follows a specific pattern of unstressed and stressed syllables:

> Freedom
> Is a strong seed
> Planted

In a great need

Here, the first and third lines (each of which consists of a single word) begin with stressed syllables, giving each of the words ("freedom" and "planted") a particular feeling of emphasis. Then, the alternating lines contain the two-beat phrases "strong seed" and "great need," calling attention to each.

This arrangement of stresses creates a somewhat syncopated rhythm, as the speaker swings between shorter and longer lines while also highlighting—with the stresses—the necessity and urgency of freedom. The use of free verse thus allows the speaker to vary the rhythm of the language in a way that not only spotlights important words, but also subtly borrows from the rhythms of the jazz and blues traditions—both of which greatly informed Langston Hughes's work.

RHYME SCHEME

As a poem written in free verse, "Democracy" has no set rhyme scheme. However, the poem *does* include multiple end rhymes, which make the speaker's language sound musical and often add emphasis to certain words or ideas.

For example, consider the end rhymes in the first stanza:

Democracy will not come
today, this year
Nor ever
Through compromise and fear.

The rhyme between "year" and "fear" creates a slight sense of pattern and organization at the beginning of the poem, giving it a measured, controlled sound that contributes to the speaker's authoritative tone. The rhyme also spotlights the word "fear" by giving it a little extra strength at the end of the stanza, underscoring the idea that people working toward change and racial justice shouldn't let themselves be intimidated into backing down.

The second stanza isn't quite the same as the first, since it contains five lines instead of four. However, it *does* end with an end rhyme in a way that feels reminiscent of the pattern in the first stanza:

To stand
On my two feet
And own the land.

There is, then, a vague feeling of consistency, even as the stanzas and the lines fluctuate in length. More importantly, these rhymes add some musicality to the poem, creating an appealing sound that draws readers from line to line. This effect is quite noticeable in the final stanza, when the speaker rhymes "too" with "you":

I live here, too.
I want freedom
Just as you.

This end rhyme gives the language a very conclusive sound, ending the poem with a decisive and memorable tone. The fact that the poem doesn't follow a strict rhyme scheme is important because it calls attention to the moments that *do* rhyme (moments, of course, like this one). Overall, though, the lack of a specific rhyming pattern makes room for the speaker to use straightforward, unadorned language that doesn't distract from the poem's primary message about the urgent need for racial justice, freedom, and equality.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Democracy" remains anonymous throughout the poem. Many readers, however, take the speaker as Langston Hughes himself.

Some historical and biographical context supports this reading: Hughes, a Black American poet, was a leader in the Harlem Renaissance, a movement of Black art and literature in the New York City neighborhood of Harlem in the early 20th century. He explored Black American experiences in his work and sought to create a distinctly Black poetics. And, like the speaker of the poem, he was a strong advocate for racial justice and equality throughout his life. For these reasons, and for the sake of simplicity, we have gendered the speaker as "he" throughout this guide.

Even without this contextual information about Langston Hughes, though, it's clear that the poem's speaker is a Black person who has experienced racism and hopes to send a simple message: namely, that freedom and equality won't simply come about on their own, and that Black people deserve the same opportunities and treatment as white people.

SETTING

It's reasonable to assume that the poem's setting aligns with the context in which it was written: the United States in the late 1940s, during the early days of the Civil Rights movement. And though Langston Hughes is often associated with New York City (and, more specifically, Harlem), the speaker's reference to "the land" suggests that the poem applies to the country as a whole.

More broadly, "Democracy" is set in an unequal society—one that is clearly not *yet* a democracy—in which people strive for equal rights but have been told that they should wait patiently for change. The speaker makes this clear by noting that democracy "will not come" on its own and that he's tired of being told that those who are oppressed should let things "take

their course" and wait until "tomorrow" for equality and freedom.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Langston Hughes first published "Democracy" in his 1949 collection, *One-Way Ticket*. Hughes was already a renowned poet by that time, having previously published 12 poetry collections in addition to several works of fiction, nonfiction, plays, and children's literature, beginning with the poetry collection *The Weary Blues* in 1926.

Hughes was a well-known leader in the Harlem Renaissance, a movement of Black art, literature, and music that emerged out of the New York City neighborhood of Harlem in roughly 1918 and extended into the mid-1930s. During the Great Migration, when a large population of Black Americans migrated from the South to cities in the Northeast in search of a better life, many settled in Harlem. There, despite continued segregation and discrimination, Black artists gathered and worked to develop art forms that spoke directly to the Black American experience.

To that end, Hughes wrote about the need for a distinctly Black aesthetic that honored and centered Black culture in his seminal 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." His own work was inspired by the Black musical forms of jazz and the blues, and he solicited the Harlem painter Jacob Lawrence—famous for his series, The Great Migration—to illustrate *One-Way Ticket* in 1949.

Although the Harlem Renaissance is considered to have ended with the onset of the Great Depression around 1933, the movement continued to influence American literature and helped lay the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement and, later, the Black Arts Movement. Hughes's own work constantly explored questions of racial equality and justice—issues he addresses directly in "Democracy."

Today, Hughes is considered a deeply influential poet whose work continues to shape currents in American literature and poetry. His poems have been translated into numerous languages and set to music, and many of them—including "Democracy"—remain as urgent and immediate today as they were when he first published them decades ago.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Hughes wrote "Democracy" at a crucial moment in American history. By the late 1940s, thousands of Black American soldiers had fought on behalf of their country in World War II. And yet, they often faced far better treatment in allied countries abroad than they did at home, where they continued to endure intense segregation, disenfranchisement, and racism in all areas of life.

Pervasive voter suppression and violence also effectively denied Black Americans the right to vote. This meant that even though Black soldiers risked their lives for their country, they were denied fair representation and, in turn, the kind of freedom that the United States was supposedly fighting to uphold abroad.

These disparities eventually played into the Civil Rights Movement, though Hughes wrote "Democracy" several years before the movement began in earnest. However, Hughes's poem anticipated the frustrating obstacles Civil Rights leaders would face in the 1950s and '60s, since important figures like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X were constantly told to wait patiently for change to come—the exact mentality that Hughes criticizes in "Democracy."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Biography of Langston Hughes — Learn more about Langston Hughes's life and poetry in this biographical article from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/langston-hughes)
- Senators and Congresswomen Read the Poem — Hear U.S. Senators and Congresswomen—including Congresswoman Barbara Lee, Senator Tammy Duckworth, and Vice President Kamala Harris, among others—read "Democracy" aloud in this 2018 video made by Moveon.org. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23dAzTZqOXY)
- Jacob Lawrence's Illustrations — Hughes solicited the Harlem painter Jacob Lawrence to illustrate One-Way Ticket, the collection in which he included "Democracy." View one of Lawrence's illustrations for the collection at the Museum of Modern Art's website. (https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2015/onewayticket/jacob-lawrence/23/)
- World War II and the Civil Rights Movement — Read more about how World War II brought into sharp relief the difference between American ideals abroad and the reality of American inequality at home—and how this fueled the Civil Rights Movement. (https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/world-war-ii-and-post-war.html)
- Article about the Harlem Renaissance — Learn more about the Harlem Renaissance, the movement of Black art and literature that Langston Hughes greatly influenced. (https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-harlem-renaissance)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LANGSTON HUGHES POEMS

- Dreams
- Dream Variations
- Harlem
- I, Too
- Let America Be America Again
- Mother to Son
- The Ballad of the Landlord
- Theme for English B
- The Negro Speaks of Rivers
- The Weary Blues

HOW TO CITE

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