And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep . . . tired . . . or it malingers,
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis? 80
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald]
brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman[2] hold my coat, and
snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worth while, 90
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus,[3] come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—
If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while, 100
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled
streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that
trail along the floor—
And this, and so much more?—
It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a
screen:
Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
"That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all." 110

. . .

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old . . . I grow old . . . 120
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the
beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown 130
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

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[2] **the eternal Footman** A footman is a servant who waits upon his master, often assisting in his private life and accompanying him on trips. In this case, he is Death.
[3] **Lazarus** The man whom Jesus raised from the dead. Lazarus was the brother of Mary and Martha of Bethany and a friend of Jesus. See John 11:1–44.

LANGSTON HUGHES

Poems

Langston Hughes (1902–1967) is one of the first great African American poets and the most published black writer of his era. Altogether he wrote sixteen books of poetry, two novels, seven books of short stories, two autobiographies, five works of nonfiction, and nine books for children. He also edited nine anthologies, translated several Haitian and Spanish writers, and wrote about thirty plays. Reviewed widely in mainstream journals by mainstream writers and

acquainted with leading artists and writers at home and abroad, Hughes was sometimes described during his lifetime as the "poet laureate of the American Negro" or as "Shakespeare in Harlem."

Hughes was a web of paradoxes that largely reflected his anguish as a black man in a white world. The son of a black middle-class family in Joplin, Missouri (his father was a businessman and his mother was a schoolteacher), he came to speak for America's poor black masses. Passionate about writing, yet distant and difficult to know, Hughes was apparently a very lonely man who never seemed to have any deep or longstanding love affairs. Familiar with standard English, having studied at Columbia University in New York (1921–1922) and graduated from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania (1929), he made his literary task the creation of a body of works based on vernacular speech of the black working and rural classes. This innovation succeeded, since subsequent black writers (see Walker's "Everyday Use") followed his lead. A citizen of the world, fluent in French and Spanish and widely traveled in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Mexico, he never wavered in his commitment to black vernacular culture.

Hughes, mainly through his poetry, soared to fame in the Harlem Renaissance, the 1920s cultural revival centered in the black area of New York City called Harlem. Jazz, blues, and folk ballads went mainstream, and Hughes was one of the first black writers to recognize the genius of this music and incorporate it into his works. He appropriated the cadences of jazz and the moods and themes of blues and folk ballads to create a soulful poetry.

Resisting the temptation encouraged by the period's growing and mobile black middle class to write in a Europeanized style, Hughes wrote primarily about blackness. His poems often concerned the struggle of black artists to be true to their race, and, at the same time, to be Americans. In 1927 he wrote, "American standardization [requires us] to be as little Negro and as much American as possible." He gradually came to see poetry as a kind of salvation, for it allowed him to speak in his African American voice and yet identify with America's heritage; for example, he claimed kinship with the reclusive poet Emily Dickinson.

Reading the Selections

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921) is Hughes's best-known poem, written when he was nineteen and a student at Columbia. This poem was inspired by a quarrel with his father, who apparently hated his own race, but it is surprisingly free of rancor on Hughes's part. The poem celebrates black history, linking it to storied rivers—the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, and the Mississippi.

"Theme for English B" (1951) and "Harlem" (1951) continue Hughes's project of integrating the black experience into American letters. It should be noted that the latter poem contains the phrase "a raisin in the sun," made even more memorable later when it became the title of a Pulitzer Prize play written by the African American playwright Lorraine Hansberry.

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers"

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

"Theme for English B"

The instructor said,

Go home and write
a page tonight.

And let that page come out of you—
Then, it will be true.
I wonder if it's that simple?

I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.
I went to school there, then Durham, then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.
I am the only colored student in my class.
The steps from the hill lead down to Harlem,
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator
up to my room, sit down, and write this page:

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:
hear you, hear me—we two—you, me talk on this page.
(I hear New York, too.) Me—who?
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,
or records—Bessie,[1] bop,[2] or Bach.

I guess being colored doesn't make me not like
the same things other folks like who are other races.
So will my page be colored that I write?
Being me, it will not be white.
But it will be
a part of you, instructor.
You are white—
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That's American.
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
But we are, that's true!
As I learn from you,
I guess you learn from me—
although you're older—and white—
and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

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[1] **Bessie** Bessie Smith (1898–1937) was a famous African American singer who sang blues songs. She worked with many popular instrumentalists and recorded nearly 200 songs.

[2] **bop** Bop or bebop was a type of complex and innovative jazz that gained popularity in the post–World War II era.

"Harlem"

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

"How It Feels to Be Colored Me"

The African American writer Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) is probably the most widely read black woman writer in schools and colleges today, but her literary reputation, like her life, has been a roller coaster. She once exulted, "I have been in Sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots. Then I have stood on the peaky mountain wrapped in rainbows, with a harp and a sword in my hands."

Born in Florida, poor and subjected to racism, Hurston moved north, where she shone as one of the most original voices of the Harlem Renaissance. From 1925 to 1945, she was a widely acclaimed writer, author of three novels (*Jonah's Gourd Vine*, 1934; *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937; and *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, 1939); two books of folklore (*Mules and Men*, 1935, and *Tell My Horse*, 1938); an autobiography (*Dust Tracks on a Road*, 1942); and many short stories, essays, and plays. After 1945, she continued to write, publishing a fourth novel (*Seraph on the Suwanee*, 1948) and a few stories and essays, but her audience lost interest and she fell into oblivion. In 1950 she worked as a maid, and when she died in a welfare home, she had all but been forgotten. That changed when growing interest in black culture led scholars to rediscover her works and restore her to a preeminent place in American letters.

Hurston's literary task resembled that of Langston Hughes (see "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," and other poems), her contemporary, in that both wrote about being black in a white-dominated world, expressed themselves in black vernacular speech, and drew on jazz, blues, and folktales. Also like Hughes, Hurston was educated; she studied at Howard University in Washington, D.C. (1921–1924), and graduated from Barnard College, New York City, in 1928. She then spent some years in Columbia University's graduate program in anthropology (her books on folklore are based on research in the American South, Jamaica, Haiti, and Bermuda). Still, when compared with Hughes, Hurston was doubly disadvantaged, for as a black and a woman writer, she had to contend with both racism and sexism. In the 1930s most black male writers dismissed her on the grounds that her writing sounded like a minstrel show. Even Hughes, while admiring her works, found her personally too ingratiating to whites: "In her youth she was always getting scholarships and things from wealthy white people, some of whom simply paid her to sit around and represent the Negro race for them, she did it in such a racy fashion." "Representing the Negro race for whites" was of course the goal of the Harlem Renaissance, and Hurston's genius was that in her writings, she did it better than anyone else.

Reading the Selection

Hurston's essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928) registers—as if in answer to an unspoken question—her complex feelings about being born black in white America. Reviewing her life (she was thirty-seven at the time), she offers a set of conflicting and ironic stereotypes to describe herself, "the 'happy Negro' who performed for white folks," "the exotic primitive," "the eternal feminine," "a brown bag in company with other bags, white, red, and yellow," only to dismiss all of them in the essay's last words: "Who knows?" Hurston's response affirms that identity, rather than being fixed, is shape-shifting—a matter of situation and strategy.

Hurston's essay is written in mainstream English, though it is barely able to contain her irrepressible spirit, which in later works was more at home in the idiom of the black oral tradition.