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What “Theme For English B” Means to Me

Langston Hughes lived in a time far different than Americans do now. He lived in a period where “whites” and “blacks” could hardly stand each other. I have no idea what that would be like, considering how much things have changed. He wrote a poem entitled, “Theme for English B,” describing how things were through his own eyes. It gives a very interesting perspective on how things were for a black man back then.

Hughes starts his poem by explaining why he is writing this paper: “The instructor said/Go home and write/ a page tonight/ And let that come out of you---/ Then it will be true,” (Hughes 1-5). His professor wants his students to dig into themselves and what is really on their hearts and that will make papers more meaningful than practically anything else he could assign for them to do. He wanted this to really mean something to his students.

His next stanza gets the readers into his mindset going into writing this paper. His first sentence, “I wonder if it’s that simple?” (6), tells the reader he does not really believe it is going to be very easy getting what he feels down on this paper. The main reason it will be difficult is because he does not think the professor will really understand since they are not exactly that same. He then gives a little background information, “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,”

(7-10). That last sentence really kind of catches the reader's attention. Harlem in the '50's was populated mainly by African American people. One would think that a school in that area would have mostly, if not all, black students. That, however, was not the case. That statement really shows how severe the segregation was back then. Those lines also tell that he is fairly well-educated; especially considering he is a black man. The rest of the stanza just tells the reader about him walking back to his apartment from the college. He takes the elevator back to his room and right away gets started on his assignment.

He starts by trying to figure out what actually is truth. He says, "It is not easy to know what is true for you or me/ at twenty-two, my age..." (16-17). He is implying that the truth is different for every person. Not everyone has the same view of truth. He continues that line with, "...But I guess I am what/ I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:/ hear you, hear me---we two---you, me, talk on this page," (17-19). The first part is saying that he senses that what he is experiencing is what he is, he is Harlem. He says that he is Harlem because that Harlem is more than just hearing him, they are listening to his poems and reflecting some of what he is writing about. When he says that they talk on the page, he talking about the cause-and-effect relationship that he has with Harlem. What he says reflects what is happening. The following line: "(I hear New York too.) Me---who?" (20) makes me think that he thinks he is just a nobody in the big city of New York. He is struggling to find himself.

He goes on to say, "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, bop, or Bach," (21-24). In those lines, he describes things that are perfectly normal. Anyone and everyone, from that time period at least, liked those things. Race

does not have an effect on any of that stuff. He is still a person, just like everyone else. His next lines pretty much say that exact thing, “I guess being colored does not make me NOT like/ the same things other folks like who are other races,” (25-26). It also seems that he really kind of wants to fit in with the people around him. However, it feels like he is having a rough time fitting in with the white people because of racism. I feel this way because he doesn’t say it makes him like people who are other races. If he felt like he fit in, he most likely would have said something along the lines of, “Although being colored, I am still like...”

His next line, “So will my page be colored that I write?” (27), is basically asking the reader if they will be able to tell that he is a black man, based on what he has written. He wonders this because many things about him make him seem like he is just like people of other races. He goes on to answer his own question, “Being me, it will not be white,” (28). That makes all the sense in the world. This page is supposed to be about the truth he feels in his heart. Part of that truth is obviously going to be about his race, considering the racism happening around him.

The next part of the poem, he turns his attention more towards his teacher: “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,” (29-33). In those few lines, he really says a lot. He is saying more than what is on this paper. He is implying that anyone who lives here in this country is American. Back in this time, white people didn’t even really consider black people to be of the same nationality as them. They believed they did not belong. However, Hughes knows, in his heart, that he is American. American has, for many years, been considered the “melting pot” of the world. There is not a single particular race that can claim they are

more “American” than another. They are ALL equal. He continues, “Sometimes perhaps you do not want to be a part of me./ Nor do I often want to be a part of you./ But we are, that’s true!” (34-36). Here he is saying that whether or not they like it, each of them is a part of the other and that is not going to change. From the last part, “But we are, that’s true!” I gathered that Hughes was saying, somewhat stubbornly, that they are just going to have to deal with it.

He closes the poem by giving a little more insight on how he feels about the equality of people. He says, “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,” (37-41). He is saying the they both can teach each other things about life, although they may be very different. He is also making a point that everyone, no matter their age or race, has something to offer.

This poem gives a little perspective on what living as a black man in this era was like. I really haven’t thought a whole lot about how it would have been to be in the position that he was in. It really showed how tough it was. He speaks about how different he may be from the other students in the class and how similar he is to those same people. Sure, he sees a difference between them. However, he feels they are still similar enough to where the African American race shouldn’t be treated the way they were. He also is prideful to be American, because he is, just like everyone else living in this fine country. He knows that he is the same as everybody else, at least in that aspect. Living in America today seems much different than Hughes describes in this poem, for everyone. As a white person, I honestly have no idea what it would be like to have all that hatred directed at

me. I cannot even really imagine being in Hughes's shoes, living as a black man in that society. However, in this poem, he gets his readers into his thoughts, just a little bit.

Works Cited

Hughes, Langston. "Theme for English B." 8 April 2009

http://www.eecs.harvard.edu/~keith/poems/English_B.html.

THEME FOR ENGLISH B

By Langston Hughes

1. The instructor said,
2. Go home and write
3. a page tonight.
4. And let that page come out of you---
5. Then, it will be true.
6. I wonder if it's that simple?
7. I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.
8. I went to school there, then Durham, then here
9. to this [college](#) on the hill above Harlem.
10. I am the only colored student in my class.
11. The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem
12. through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,
13. Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,
14. the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator
15. up to my room, sit down, and write this page:

16. It's not easy to know what is true for you or me
17. at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what
18. I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:
19. hear you, hear me---we two---you, me, talk on this page.
20. (I hear New York too.) Me---who?
21. Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.
22. I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.
23. I like a pipe for a Christmas present,
24. or records---Bessie, bop, or Bach.
25. I guess being colored doesn't make me NOT like
26. the same things other folks like who are other races.
27. So will my page be colored that I write?
28. Being me, it will not be white.
29. But it will be
30. a part of you, instructor.
31. You are white---
32. yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
33. That's American.
34. Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
35. Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
36. But we are, that's true!
37. As I learn from you,
38. I guess you learn from me---
39. although you're older---and white---
40. and somewhat more free.

41. This is my page for English B.