“200 Years of Afro-American Poetry” by Langston Hughes name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

*Background: Poet and writer Langston Hughes stood at the center of the Harlem renaissance, and advocated the preservation and communication of African American traditions across the genres of music, poetry, and theater. His own poetry often used the musical patterns of spirituals and the blues as received forms. In the 1960s, when this essay was published, Hughes’ refusal to convey a definitive political stance in his work caused some tension within the African American community, where conversation was dominated by the voices of Martin Luther King and Stokely Carmichael.     
  
In this essay, published two years before his death, Hughes offers an historical examination of the trajectory of African American poetry, beginning with the work of Lucy Terry, a slave, in 1746, and continuing through Phillis Wheatley and Paul Laurence Dunbar to the rising generation of African American poets in the 1950s and 60s, including LeRoi Jones, Julia Fields, Julian Bond, and David Henderson.*

Poets and versifiers of African descent have been publishing poetry on American shores since the year 1746 when a slave woman named Lucy Terry penned a rhymed description of an Indian attack on the town of Deerfield, Massachusetts, a quarter of a century before the revolt of the New England colonies against Britain.\* And it was a Negro woman, Phillis Wheatley, who in one of her poems applied the oft quoted phrase “First in Peace” to General George Washington before he 5 became the first President of the United States, From his rebel field encampment the General sent the young poetess a note which read in part, “If you should ever come to Cambridge or near headquarters, I shall be happy to see a person so favored by the Muses\*, and to whom Nature has been so liberal and beneficent in her dispensations. I am with great respect, Your Obedient Humble Servant, George Washington.”

Born in Senegal, Phillis Wheatley fortunately had been purchased at the age of seven or eight by a kindly master and 10 mistress who took a fancy to the little black girl offered for sale on the decks of a slave ship in Boston Harbor. Of course, the tiny African spoke no English, and nobody knew her name, so she was given her master’s name, Wheatley, and her mistress, who called her Phillis, taught her to read and write. In her teens, the black youngster began to write poetry. Before Phillis was twenty, she was well known throughout the New England colonies for her poems. She wrote herself to freedom, modeling her verses after those of Milton, Dryden, and Alexander Pope\* (as was the fashion of her times) and, as 15 a representative of colonial culture, Phillis Wheatley was sent to England where her book, Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, was printed in London in 1773. It was the first bound volume of poems by an Afro-American to appear in print. [Here is one of her better known poems, “On Being Brought from Africa to America”]:

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,  
 Taught my benighted soul to understand  
20 That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:  
 Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.  
 Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
 "Their colour is a diabolic die.”  
 Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,  
25 May be refined, and join thy angelic train. [ . . . ]

The first Negro poet whose work had a wide appeal for the white public was Paul Laurence Dunbar, born in Ohio in 1872 of parents who had been slaves. His mother could not read or write so, after Paul ac­quired some book learning in school, he began to teach his mother. But fortunately, the little boy did not erase from his mother’s tongue the quaint broken speech of the slave period. Her plantation dialect, and that of other elderly negroes who had known bondage in the Deep South, 30 injected the folk flavor in much of Dunbar’s poetry. The charm and humor of this now almost unreadable slave English gave unique color to his work. Unfortunately, this idiomatic flavor is [nearly] impossible to translate into European tongues—or even to put successfully into contemporary English—just as Chaucer or Shakespeare’s original language loses much of its patina when transcribed into modern speech. Paul Laurence Dunbar was Negro America’s first major (albeit minor) poet. A half century after his death, some of his poems are still read and recited by the Negro people, and some like “Li’l Gal” have 35 been made into charming songs. [NOTE: Most texts render “L’il Gal” rather that Hughes’ preferred “Li’l Gal.]

**TEXT 2: “L’il Gal” by Laurence Dunbar**

13. What “trouble” is *brewing* and *stewing* in the speaker’s heart?

Oh, de weathah it is balmy an’ de breeze  
   is sighin’ low,  
       Li’l’ Gal,  
 An’ de mockin’ bird is singin’ in de locus’  
   40 by de do’,  
      Li’l’ gal,  
 Dere’ a hummin’ an’ a bummin’ in de  
   lan’ f’om eas’ to wes’,  
 I’s a-sighin’ fo’ you, honey, an’ I nevah  
45   know no res’,  
 Fu’ dey’s lots o’ trouble brewin’ an’  
   a-stewin’ in my breas’,  
      Li’l’ gal.

[NOTE: follow link for an original audio version of the song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBZH8leA5ig> ]

Dunbar died in 1906 at an early age. But a contemporary, James Wel­don Johnson, lived much longer and wrote both poetry 50 and prose of quality. Mr. Johnson simplified the folk speech of the semi-illiterate Ne­groes of their generation and, in his transcriptions of the prayers, chants and sermons of black preachers which he put into poetry (without the misspellings of literal dialect), achieved in God’s Trombones a folk syn­thesis of genuine beauty. The poems from this volume are enjoyed on radio, television and in the theatre today. They are a blend of the re­gional idioms of the Negro South and the sonorous rhythms of the Bible from which the black religionists drew their inspiration. [ . . . ]

55 James Weldon Johnson, in his preface to God’s Trombones, expresses well the problems of the American Negro poet who wishes to preserve in his work racial tones and color, but desires an instrument of greater range than illiterate speech. Mr. Johnson wrote, “What the colored poet in the United States needs to do is something like what Synge did for the Irish\*; he needs to find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within, rather than by symbols from without—such as the mere mutilation of spelling and pronunciation.” This transition in language from the quaintness of dialect to the 60 preservation of Negro idioms and flavor in straight English, set a style which, since the publication of God’s Trombones in 1927, many other Negro poets including Sterling Brown and myself have followed. In my poems in the manner of the blues and spirituals, I have attempted to inject a sense of racial color and rhythms into the broader framework of the American language. [ . . . ]

Whatever the forms Negro poetry has taken in the last century, rang­ing from conventional English couplets and quatrains 65 to free verse, from light lyrics to the well-knit sonnet, from the blues and the spirituals to the highly personalized beatnik concepts of some of the younger black poets in Greenwich Village or San Francisco, the subject matter of Negro poetry East, West, North or South has remained more or less constant—the problems of freedom in a white dominated society. Most Negro poets a hundred years ago, and most Negro poets today are protest poets. When Claude McKay (1889-1948) came out of the Caribbean to the United States to publish in 1922 his Harlem Shadows containing many excellent sonnets, 70 the poem therein to attain lasting fame and great popularity was his most militant sonnet, If We Must Die. This poem was a protest against the monstrous barbarity of the race riots which plagued America in the second decade of our century, and its advice to fight back struck a responsive chord in Negroes:

**TEXT 3: “If We Must Die” by Claude McKay**

14. Who are the “accursed lot”? Why are they strongly disliked (accursed means to have a curse placed on you or to be strongly disliked (as if you were cursed) )?

15. How would they have died in “vain”?

16. How does the speaker characterize his assailants?

17. How does McKay take the simile in the first line and change it by the end of the poem?

18. What is the tone of the poem?

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
 Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
75 While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
 Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
 If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
 So that our precious blood may not be shed  
 In vain; Then even the monsters we defy  
80 Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
 O kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!  
 Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
 And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!  
 What though before us lies the open grave?  
85 Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
 Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

When Countee Cullen in 1925 published Color, a volume of lyric po­etry, his poem “Incident” about a little white boy in Baltimore who insult­ingly called another little boy nigger  soon became and still is the most quoted of Cullen’s poems:

Once riding in old Baltimore,  
90 Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,  
 I saw a Baltimorean  
 Keep looking straight at me.

**TEXT 4: “Incident” by Countee Cullen**

19. Is there any way to read this poem and not completely understand Cullen’s anger?

Now I was eight and very small,  
 And he was no whit bigger,  
95 And so I smiled, but he poked out  
 His tongue, and called me, nigger.

I saw the whole of Baltimore  
 From May until December.  
 Of all the things that happened there  
100 That’s all that I remember.

Written in the Nineteen Twenties during the period of Harlem’s “Negro Renaissance” Waring Cuney’s “No Images,” about the proscribed beauty of a brown girl has, of all his work, been the most widely reprinted.

**TEXT 5: “No Images” by Waring Cuney**

20. What is Cuney’s attitude (tone) toward the girl he discusses in this poem?

21. Why “dish water” (13)? What is the implication? What does the girl do for a living?

She does not know  
 Her beauty,  
105 She thinks her brown body  
 Has no glory

If she could dance naked,  
 Under palm trees  
 And see her image in the river  
110 She would know.

But there are no palm trees  
 On the street,  
 And dish water  
 Gives back no images.

115 Directly concerned with the race problem, my own poem, “I, Too,” written in 1920 when I was eighteen years old, has over the years been translated into many languages and is still being reprinted in anthologies around the world.

**TEXT 6: “I, Too” by Langston Hughes**

22. The kitchen Hughes discusses can be literal (as in, as a black man, the most likely job he could get was working in the kitchen for a wealthy white family), but it becomes metaphorical by the end of the poem. Explain.

23. What connections do you see between Hughes’ poem and Cuney’s?

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.  
 They send me to eat in the kitchen  
120 When company comes,  
 But I laugh,  
 And eat well,  
 And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
125 I’ll sit at the table  
 When company comes.  
 Nobody’ll dare  
 Say to me,  
 “Eat in the kitchen,”  
130 Then.  
 Besides,  
 They’ll see how beautiful I am  
 And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

135 The desire to be an integral part of the life of the country whose soil the Negro people have inhabited for three hundred years is a majority desire. [ . . . ] [O]ver the years, the basic and most pertinent subject matter of Negro poetry has been not love, roses, moonlight, or death or sorrow in the abstract, but race, color, and the emotional problems related thereunto in a land that treats its black citizens, including poets, like pariahs\*. Only a very few Negro writers have been able to escape the impact on their lives of this white shadow across America.

140 It would seem to me then only fitting and proper—if art is to be an intensification or enlargement of life, or to give adequate comment on what living is like in the poet’s own time—that Negro art be largely protest art. Our time today is the time of color from Selma to Saigon\*, and of the heartaches and heartbreaks of racial conflict from Cape Town to Chicago\*. [ . . . ] . The color problem is a drag on the whole world, not just on Negro poetry.

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| Lucy Terry (3): The poem to which Hughes refers is “Bar Fight,” by the African American writer Lucy Terry (ca. 1730-1821). | Muses (7): Mythological allusion, the Muses were responsible for inspiring creativity in artists. The term “muse” has since come into English as any source of inspiration. | Milton, Dryden, Pope (14): A whole bunch of boring European poets who, thankfully, we don’t have to read. Hooray! | Synge . . . Irish (57): Synge was a key figure in an Irish nationalist movement in the late 19th century. At the time, Ireland was a British colony, and we know how the British treated their colonies. Synge inspired national pride and identity in the Irish people. |
| pariahs (138): outcasts  “Selma to Saigon” (142): Hughes references the Selma march led by MLK and Saigon, a city in Vietnam (this piece was written during the Vietnam War). Hughes like MLK before him, saw the Vietnam War as unjust in that it exploited the Vietnamese people and African-Americans who were drafted. | “Cape Town to Chicago” (142): Cape Town is a city in South Africa where segregation was still legal at the time of Hughes’ writing. Chicago was the scene of a riots during the ’68 Democratic Convention. | NOTES  (1) Hughes intended this piece as an introduction to Jean Wagner’s Anthology de la Poésie Negro-Américaine, which was translated as Black Poets of the United States: From Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973). The poem to which Hughes refers is “Bar Fight,” by the African American writer Lucy Terry (ca. 1730-1821).  (2) Jupiter Hammon (1711-ca. 1806), the first published African American writer, was a poet, essayist, and preacher; George Moses Horton (ca. 1797-ca. 1883), the first African American to use verse to protest slavery; Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911), African American novelist, poet, essayist, and orator. | (3) William Waring Cuney (1906-1976), one of the lesser-known poets of the Harlem Renaissance.  (4) Richard Gibson, African American journalist.  (5) Julia Fields (1938-), African American poet, short story writer, teacher, and dramatist; Julian Bond (1940-), African American activist, historian, and educator; David Henderson, African American poet and biographer.  (6) Dudley Randall (1914-2000), African American poet, publisher, and editor. |

**QUESTIONS FOR THE ESSAY**

1. Why does Hughes include the quote from George Washington in the opening paragraph?

2. Hughes says that it was “fortunate” that Dunbar could not get his mother to speak in an educated manner (28). Why was it fortunate?

3. Hughes claims that Dunbar’s work had a “folk flavor” to it (30). What does this expression mean? Can you relate it to how Twain and Chopin wrote?

4. Parenthetically, Hughes calls Dunbar a “minor” poet (33). How could Dunbar been both a “major” and “minor” poet?

5. What does Hughes find admirable about Johnson’s work?

6. Johnson wanted to express “ ‘racial spirit by symbols from within’ ” (58). Who decided what the racial “ ’symbols from without’ ” were and why, by comparison, are the symbols from within superior?

7. What is the “constant” problem African-American poets encountered according to Hughes (67)? Why was it a problem?

8. Why is African-American poetry, by necessity, protest art?

**TEXT 1: “On Being Brought from Africa to America” by Wheatley**

9. What made the land from which the speaker was brought a "Pagan land" (18)?

10. Why was it a “mercy” that the speaker was brought to America (18)?

11. The dialogue in line 23 is most likely being spoken by whom?

12. What is the “angelic train” which the speaker hopes to join (25)?