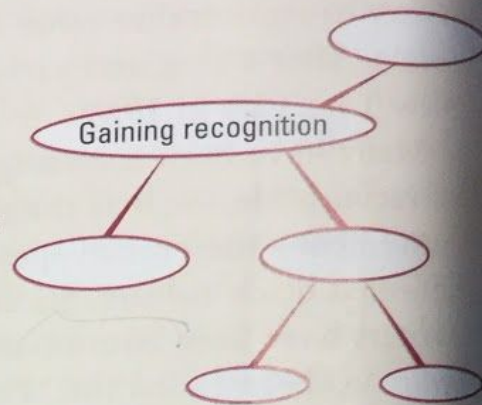


# Selected Poems

by LANGSTON HUGHES

## Connect to Your Life

**Gaining Recognition** Think about a time when you wanted to win recognition from a group or an individual. What accomplishment or quality were you hoping would be noticed? What strategies did you use to gain recognition? Use a cluster diagram like the one shown to explore the idea of gaining recognition. Then share your thoughts with a classmate.



## Build Background

**Poet of Blues and Jazz** When Langston Hughes began to write, many African-American poets tried to sound like the white poets they had read in school. Instead of following that practice, Hughes incorporated the patterns of African-American speech and the rhythms of African-American music into his poetry. By doing so, Hughes hoped to gain recognition for the beauty of his culture. He also wrote protest poems, such as "I, Too," to expose the injustice of Jim Crow laws that imposed segregation upon African Americans.

Both "The Weary Blues" and "Harlem" are influenced by music. "The Weary Blues" draws on the blues, a style of music that African Americans developed in the late 19th century. Blues lyrics, which typically express sorrow or melancholy, often consist of three-line verses in which the second line repeats the first and the third expresses a response to the other two. "Harlem" draws on bebop jazz of the 1940s. Jazz evolved from ragtime and blues in the early 20th century. The music is characterized by syncopation, heavily accented rhythms, and improvisation on tunes and chord patterns. Bebop jazz has more complicated melodies and faster rhythmic changes than traditional jazz.



**LaserLinks: Background for Reading**  
Music Connection

## Focus Your Reading

**LITERARY ANALYSIS MOOD** The **mood** of a poem is the emotional feeling or atmosphere that the poet creates for a reader. Poets create mood through their use of **imagery, figurative language, sound devices, rhythm, and description**. For example, the following line from "The Weary Blues" helps create a feeling of tiredness:

*By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light*

As you read each of the following poems, pay attention to the different moods that Hughes creates and the elements he uses to create them.

### ACTIVE READING DETECTING RHYTHM IN POETRY

Inspired by the blues and jazz he heard in Harlem nightclubs, Hughes tried to write poetry with the distinctive **rhythms** of these types of music. As you read the poems, try to detect the different rhythms that Hughes creates through his arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line. Use one or more of the following suggestions:

- Read the poems aloud, listening for the rhythm.
- Tap the rhythm out as you read the poems silently to yourself.
- Imagine how the poems would sound recited over a background of music, such as blues or jazz.

**READER'S NOTEBOOK** As you read the poems, copy lines whose rhythm appeals to you. Put accent marks over the syllables that you think should be stressed.



# Harlem

LANGSTON HUGHES

What happens to a dream deferred?

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

10 Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

*Black Manhattan* 1969 Romare Bearden.  
Collage and Synthetic Polymer on board, 25 3/8" x 21".  
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,  
Art & Artifacts Division, New York Public Library,  
Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.  
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# The Weary Blues

LANGSTON HUGHES

Droning a drowsy syncopated<sup>1</sup> tune,  
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,<sup>2</sup>  
I heard a Negro play.  
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night  
5 By the pale dull pallor<sup>3</sup> of an old gas light  
He did a lazy sway. . . .  
He did a lazy sway. . . .  
To the tune o' those Weary Blues.  
With his ebony hands on each ivory key  
10 He made that poor piano moan with melody.  
O Blues!  
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool  
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.  
Sweet Blues!  
15 Coming from a black man's soul.  
O Blues!  
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone  
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—  
“Ain't got nobody in all this world,  
20 Ain't got nobody but ma self.  
I's gwine to quit ma frownin'  
And put ma troubles on the shelf.”  
Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.  
He played a few chords then he sang some more—  
25 “I got the Weary Blues  
And I can't be satisfied.  
Got the Weary Blues  
And can't be satisfied—  
I ain't happy no mo'  
30 And I wish that I had died.”  
And far into the night he crooned that tune.  
The stars went out and so did the moon.  
The singer stopped playing and went to bed  
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.  
35 He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

1. syncopated (sɪŋ'kə-pā'tɪd): characterized by a shifting of stresses from normally strong to normally weak beats.  
2. croon: a soft humming or singing.  
3. pallor (pāl'ər): lack of color.



# I, Too

LANGSTON HUGHES

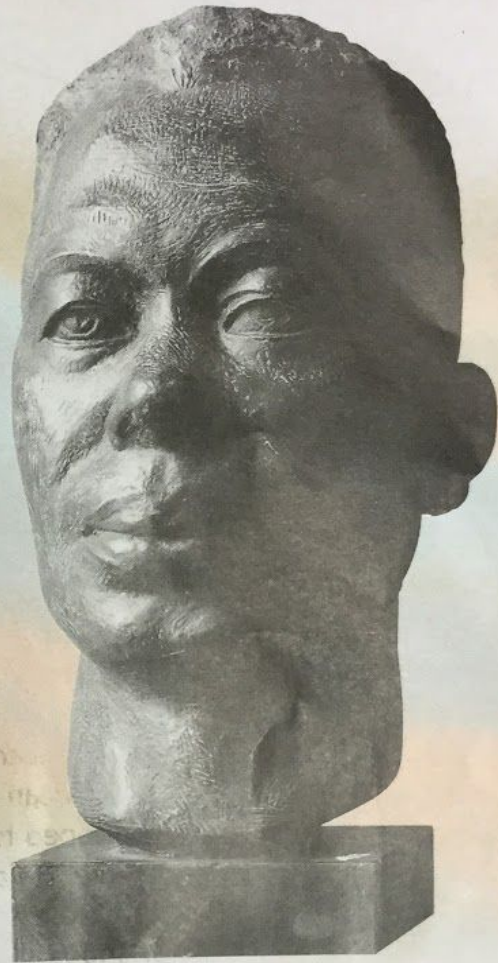
I, too, sing America.

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

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
10 When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.

15 Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.



*Jim*, Selma Burke. Art and Artifacts Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

## Thinking Through the Literature

1. What is your opinion of the **speaker**? Share your thoughts with a classmate.
2. What do you believe the poem is saying about America?

THINK ABOUT

- the first and last lines
- the identities of the speaker and the "they," in lines 3 and 16
- what is meant by "when company comes," in line 4
- what the speaker wants other people to recognize

3. How do you think the speaker expects to move from the "kitchen" to the "table"? How do you view his expectations?



# LANGSTON HUGHES

## 1902–1967



Langston Hughes emerged from the Harlem Renaissance as the most prolific and successful black writer in America. Although he is best known for his poetry, he also wrote plays, fiction, autobiographical sketches, and movie screenplays.

Born in Missouri and raised in Illinois and Ohio, Hughes attended high school in Cleveland, where he contributed poetry to the school literary magazine. In 1921 he moved to New York City to attend classes at Columbia University, but a year later he left school to travel to Europe and Africa as a merchant seaman. When he returned to the United States, he met the poet Vachel Lindsay, who helped him publish his first volume of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926). The book attracted considerable attention and earned Hughes widespread recognition.

Hughes went on to publish several other collections of poetry, including *The Dream Keeper* (1932), *Fields of Wonder* (1947), and *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951). In his poetry he experimented with a variety of forms and techniques and often tried to re-create the rhythms of contemporary jazz. Using his talents as a poet, he expressed pride in his heritage and voiced his displeasure with the oppression of blacks.

During the 1950's, Hughes helped to support himself by contributing a number of prose sketches to newspapers. Among the most popular was a series of tales about a fictional character named Jesse B. Semple, whom Hughes often referred to as "Simple." In 1963 Hughes developed these sketches into a musical play, *Simply Heaven*.

Hughes's work not only helped make the general public aware of black life, but it also inspired many other black writers. By eloquently chronicling the heritage of the black people and expressing their pride and determination, Hughes provided his people with a link to their cultural roots and a promise for a better future.