



## The Interplay of Theme and Technique: A Critical Reading of Langston Hughes' 'Democracy'

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### Abstract

This paper aims to explore how Langston Hughes employs his poetic techniques to reflect the themes he handles in his poem 'Democracy', from the *One-Way Ticket* collection. The paper opens with an introduction about the literary significance of Langston Hughes as an influential writer whose works remarkably enrich African American literature. For the theoretical framework of the paper, the researcher provides an insight into the historical context of slavery, racial oppression, and segregation in the United States, showing how such pervasive issues cast their long shadow over the poem. The analytical approach is utilized in a way that permits a precise examination of the poem's stanzas and lines, together with detecting the technical devices used by the poet. The part of the paper dedicated to discussion highlights the interplay of theme and technique, taking the reader gradually into observing how Hughes conveys the ideas, messages, and feelings he poses in the poem via the use of highly expressive technical devices. Following a detailed discussion and analysis of the thematic and technical elements in 'Democracy', the researcher presents his conclusions, highlighting Hughes' crafty use of stylistic and technical devices to convey the urgent need of Black Americans for freedom and democracy, to save them from the racial oppression and segregation they encounter in American society.

**Keywords:** Langston Hughes, 'Democracy,' theme, technique, African American literature

### المستخلص :

تقدم هذه الورقة البحثية قراءة نقدية لقصيدة "الديمقراطية" للشاعر والأديب العالمي لانغستون هيوز، موضحةً كيف أن الشاعر يستخدم أساليبه الفنية بمهارة فائقة تعكس الموضوعات والأفكار والرؤى والمشاعر التي يطرحها في قصيدته. تستهل الباحثة ورقتها البحثية بمقدمة مختصرة عن الشاعر وأعماله الأدبية المتنوعة، ودوره الرائد في الأدب الإفريقي الأمريكي. وتستخدم الباحثة إطاراً نظرياً يسرد بإيجاز السياق التاريخي للعبودية والتمييز العنصري الذي ساد في المجتمع الأمريكي لقرون طويلة، مشيرة إلى أهم الأحداث والقوانين والحركات السياسية التي أثرت في الصراع بين الأمريكيين البيض والسود، لاسيما حركة الحقوق المدنية التي قام بها الأمريكيون السود ورموزها البارزين الذين قادوا مظاهرات السود واحتجاجاتهم في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية من أجل الحصول على الحرية والمساواة. هذا، وتوضح الباحثة كيف تلقي هذه الأحداث التاريخية والسياسية بظلالها على القصيدة موضع الدراسة. وتعتمد الدراسة على المنهج التحليلي بطريقة سلسلة تمكن الباحثة من تحليل أبيات القصيدة والوقوف على الأساليب الفنية التي يستخدمها الشاعر لنقل أفكاره وآرائه. وتسلط المناقشة الضوء على التداخل والتفاعل بين الموضوع والأسلوب الفني في القصيدة، مما يمكن القارئ من ملاحظة كيف ينقل هيوز الأفكار والرسائل والمشاعر التي يطرحها في الأبيات من خلال استخدام أساليب فنية معبرة. وبعد مناقشة وتحليل مفصلين للموضوع والأسلوب الفني في القصيدة، تقدم الباحثة النتائج التي توصلت إليها، موضحةً أن الشاعر في هذه القصيدة استطاع بمهارته وحكته الأدبية أن يستخدم مجموعة من الأساليب الفنية التي تعبر عن أفكاره وموضوعاته وتعكس حاجة الأمريكيين السود إلى الحرية والديمقراطية، لإنقاذهم من القمع والفصل العنصري الذي واجهوه وعانوا منه في المجتمع الأمريكي.

الكلمات الدلالية: لانغستون هيوز، "الديمقراطية"، الموضوع، الأسلوب الفني، الأدب الإفريقي الأمريكي

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### Introduction: The Literary Legacy of Langston Hughes

Langston Hughes (1901 – 1967), a leading Black American poet, novelist, dramatist, and editor, made the African American experience the focal aspect of his literature. More than any other black writer, Hughes faithfully recorded the particularities of African American life. He vividly portrays the daily experiences of black people through moments of happiness and sadness, optimism and frustration, love and fear; such complex feelings give an insight into their aspirations, defeats, and triumphs. His works, especially poems, paint the African American fight for freedom, justice, and equality, showing all sides of the struggle for dignity and hoping for a better and more democratic future for black people. As Duki writes,

Hughes' poetry is used to encourage his people during their hard times. He was a powerful man who used his poetry skills to express his feelings towards the African American race, which was being highly discriminated against. Langston Hughes did not only impact the African American Community of his time but became an inspiration for all generations. (162)

In the summer following his high school graduation in 1921, Hughes wrote his famous poem 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers'. The poem was published in *The Crisis* magazine, drawing attention to the young man and establishing him as a promising poet. Following the publication of his first poem, Hughes wrote hundreds of poems that appeared in 16 collections of poetry, including *The Weary Blues* (1926), *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), *Freedom's Plow* (1943), and *Lament for Dark Peoples and Other Poems* (1944), among many others. The *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* appeared in 1958, and his *Collected Poems* was published in 1994.

In addition to his massive body of poetry, Hughes wrote eleven plays and several prose works, including the popular *Simple* series: *Simple Speaks His Mind* (1950), *Simple Takes a Wife* (1953), *Simple Stakes a Claim* (1957), and *Simple's Uncle Sam* (1965). He wrote the celebrated autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940), coedited *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746–1949* (1949) with Arna Bontemps, and edited *The Book of Negro Folklore* (1958). He also co-authored the play *Mule Bone* (1991) with Zora Neale Hurston. Through these versatile works encompassing poetry, prose, and drama, "Hughes maintained his commitment to the Black cause all along his career and succeeded in navigating the two worlds of Black and White intelligentsia" (Dualé 2).

On May 22, 1967, Hughes passed away in New York City after this rich and varied literary enterprise—a legacy that continues to shape and define the Black experience and African American literature. In his honor, his former home at 20 East 127th Street in Harlem was designated a landmark site, and the street was renamed Langston Hughes Place.

Remarkably, Hughes' poetry reflects on the contradictions of American life, particularly the distance between its stated commitment to democracy, justice, and freedom and the harsh truths of racism and inequality. In 'Democracy', as in other poems such as 'Let America Be America Again' and 'I, Too', the poet emphasizes the discrepancy between what America had promised to be in theory and what the reality of life was in practice for Black Americans who were not included in that promise. However, with Hughes' poems, hope shines and depicts the possibility of change, presenting the fight for freedom and democracy as an eternal struggle. This reveals the idea that despite the flaws and paradoxes in American society, the principles of equality and democracy offer a foothold for promoting freedom and justice. As Sitti and Putra put it, "Although America is seen as a state of paradox in carrying out the principles of its country, ... the embryo of democracy can be a foothold to fight for that freedom" (120).

### **From Slavery to Segregation: An Overview of Racial Oppression in America**

In their book *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, Franklin and Moss point out that the origins of slavery in the United States date back to the 17th century, specifically to 1619, when Captain John Gookin and the crew of the English ship *White Lion* brought twenty enslaved Africans to the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia (53). This marked the beginning of an era that would significantly affect the American nation socially, politically, and economically for centuries to come.

The enslaved Africans felt themselves to be inferior and were treated as savages; therefore, their rights were systematically denied and violated. They were subjected to inhumane living conditions and continuous brutality, and were treated as property, not humans. Their oppression by white Americans was manifested through different modes: physical violence, persecution, marginalization, social degradation, economic deprivation, and sexual abuse. This is the racist frame of mind that gave some kind of perverted justification for the dehumanization that people of color suffered in the United States.

Black people organized numerous rebellions and uprisings as a way of resisting the racism that was being practiced against them in American society. "By 1822, over 150 slave revolts or attempted slave revolts had taken place in the United State" (Kynor 55). Their broad resistance came to a head in the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, which made Black slaves in America legally free. Yet, even with this declaration of freedom, Blacks continued to be denied so many basic rights.

For further establishment of racial oppression and segregation, the Supreme Court in 1896 gave a thumbs-up to the Jim Crow laws: it was a prerequisite for the Black Americans to avail of different, inferior facilities and services as compared to the ones given to the whites. Racial segregation was thus firmly institutionalized, with Black people excluded in practice from equal participation in American society. Under this legal structure that intentionally propagated a strict regime of segregation and inequality, African Americans were denied full exercise of the right to vote and were made to suffer under endless subjugation. They were denied the right to equal education and property rights. Shedding more light on this issue, Edis and Sari explain,

Jim Crow Laws were created ...to help the states, specifically Southern states, to control newly freed slaves.... To exemplify, laws prohibited marriage between whites and colored people. White female nurses cannot cure colored people. At the train or bus stations, waiting rooms were separated. Signboards are used to make the separation clearer. Colored people cannot go to restaurants where white people have lunch or dinner. Colored people had to sit in the back seats of the bus and if required, they have to give up their seats to white people as claimed.... Colored barbers cannot serve white girls or women. This segregationist policy was even applied in cemeteries. Cemeteries and burial states were separated for whites and colored people. (276)

The discriminatory practices of segregation persisted into the twentieth century, but Black Americans never ceased their fight for civil rights. Leading activists like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Roy Wilkins, Whitney M. Young Jr., James Farmer, John Lewis, and many others played a crucial role in inflaming public opinion with their dedicated demands for an end to segregation and the attainment of equality. Various Black organizations emerged, providing a powerful voice

for the cause and challenging segregation through legal battles, protests, and demonstrations. Significant among these were the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), established in 1909; the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), founded in 1957; and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), formed in 1960.

The March on Washington is one of the most remarkable events in the history of the Civil Rights Movement and, indeed, the greatest political demonstration ever experienced in the United States. For people of color, it marked a crucial juncture. The march, organized by Black leaders and commanded by Martin Luther King Jr., reached its climax at the Lincoln Memorial, where King gave his powerful "I Have a Dream" speech. His words captured the unrelenting drive for freedom and justice of the protesters:

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today. (qtd. in Friedman 45)

These great efforts led to significant legislative changes, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, both of which aimed to dismantle institutional racism and eliminate racial segregation. While these triumphs were crucial steps forward, the lingering effects of racial oppression have continued to affect American society and obstruct the full realization of justice and equality.

The struggles, challenges, and hopes of Black Americans in the United States mentioned above find a vibrant echo in Hughes' poetry, which records his people's quest for freedom and dignity. Hughes represents the harsh realities of racial discrimination and oppression, along with aspirations toward equality and justice. As Shaymaa Mohammed aptly puts it, "The poet writes his poems in a time in which literature in general, and poetry in particular, represent the spring from which the Blacks start their revolution against racism" (165-166).

### Discussion: The Interplay of Theme and Technique in 'Democracy'

A significant poem in the collection *One-Way Ticket* that was published in 1949, 'Democracy' by Langston Hughes, describes the dilemma of Black Americans in the United States and their yearning for freedom and justice. Written in the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement, the poem is told from the viewpoint of a young African American at a period in which racial discrimination and segregation in American society reached a peak. The poet divides his poem into five stanzas of varied meter, rhythm, and rhyme.

Expertly, Hughes uses his poetic techniques to reflect the main theme of the poem. Throughout the poem, Hughes depicts the severe segregation and inequality of those oppressed people in a land that is supposed to defend democracy and advocate human rights. According to the speaker, democracy will remain absent, and American society will never be a truly democratic one till all people living in America, including people of color, find justice and freedom. Accordingly, true justice should not be delayed; rather, it should be an immediate, tangible reality simply because delayed justice is nothing but denied justice. This is what the poet asserts in the following lines of the poem:

I tire so of hearing people say,  
Let things take their course.  
Tomorrow is another day.  
I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.  
I cannot live on tomorrow's bread. (Hughes 77)

As the lines reveal, the poet gets tired of people's repeated advice that he must wait and that things will change soon. He is really irritated by those sterile arguments that put the achievement of equal rights on hold for years and years, claiming that 'things' should be allowed to take their course so that matters eventually end well and democracy is finally obtained. However, the poet reacts decisively to those people, stating, 'I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.' His firm reply strongly suggests that the need for freedom is urgent, and the time is short to enjoy it. He asserts that he 'cannot live on' the hopes of tomorrow. He needs his freedom immediately.

Skillfully, Hughes employs the technique of enjambment throughout the poem to reflect all these meanings discussed above. This can be seen in the last two stanzas:

Freedom  
Is a strong seed  
Planted  
In a great need.  
I live here, too.  
I want freedom  
Just as you. (Hughes 77)

The use of enjambment here emphasizes the urgency and immediate need for freedom and democracy now, with no delay. The lines go on, from the first line to the end of the first stanza, and similarly from the last line but one to the end of the second stanza, without any punctuation pauses or barriers, reflecting the speaker's demanding need for freedom which he and his fellow Black Americans need immediately, without any postponement.

Rhyme is the vehicle through which Hughes conveys his central message and reflects his main theme in 'Democracy'. In the poem's last stanza quoted above, the alternative rhyme in lines one and three between the two words 'too' and 'you' is indicative. It focuses attention on the two words, suggesting that the speaker addresses White Americans as if telling them that he 'too' lives in the same land they 'live' in; accordingly, he 'too' wants 'freedom' like them.

Apostrophe is the poetic technique Hughes expressly uses in the last stanza of the poem to convey his point of view. The poet addresses someone saying, 'I want freedom / just as you'. The addressed 'you' here may refer to White Americans or the readers of his poems themselves. Whatever the case is, the poet wants his addressees to join the struggle for justice and equal rights and witness how the speaker and his fellow African Americans are deprived of their right to freedom and democracy while others in the same society enjoy this right.

Metaphor is also employed by Hughes to reflect the intended meaning he poses in the poem. Two examples of metaphor are noted: one in the last line of stanza three, 'I cannot live on tomorrow's bread', and another in the opening lines of stanza four where the poet states, 'Freedom / is a strong seed'. In the first case of metaphor, he equates freedom with 'bread' – that is, as much necessary for man as bread to survive; similarly,



a man needs his freedom and democracy immediately. The second instance of metaphor that exists in stanza four compares freedom to a seed that is rooted 'in a great need' and is accordingly expected to grow quickly, exactly as Black Americans anticipate that the seed of freedom and democracy grows rapidly to satisfy their 'urgent need' for justice and self-determination.

Within the historical context of the continuous attempts of the American government to hinder the process of freedom and insist on restricting the rights of the people of color in society, Hughes refers to the passage of time in attaining the democracy that has been long yearned for by the Blacks, indicating that it will never come by 'compromise and fear', whether 'today, this year' or 'ever' as long as White Americans stick to this racial mind set. To express his idea, Hughes uses asyndeton, the omission of conjunctions between parts of the sentence, as shown in the following lines:

Democracy will not come  
Today, this year  
Nor ever  
Through compromise and fear. (Hughes 77)

About a century after the Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, which provided freedom for people of color in the United States,

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. (Little, par. 12)

In 'Democracy', Hughes outstandingly employs a varied meter, that is, varied length of stanzas and lines to convey his themes and ideas. The poem consists of five stanzas. Stanzas 1 and 4 are quatrains, consisting of four lines each. Stanzas 2 and 3 are cinquains, including five lines each. The last stanza is a tercet containing only three lines. It is also noted that the lines in the cinquains are longer than the lines in both the quatrains and the final stanza which is a tercet.

The varied length of stanzas and lines is expertly planned by the poet to reflect and reinforce the meaning he intends in the poem as if the longer stanzas and lines, as seen in stanza 3, for example, look suitable for elaboration and argument about democracy and the long time 'things' need to 'take their course'. On the other hand, the shorter stanzas and lines, as noted in the last quatrain and sestet, directly reflect the poet's urgent situation and show that he is really 'in a great need' of freedom and democracy. This is what Alghamdi highlights:

Arguably, the reason for these variations is to control the pace of the poem. Meaningfully, the five lines in stanzas 2 and 3 allow the speaker to elaborate on his right to equality and the 'tire' that he feels when he is told to just wait for it to happen. While the only three lines in the last stanza show the speaker's urgent, immediate, and direct message. The length of the lines is different, ranging from one word in lines 15 and 17 to eight words in line 13. The variety of the lines' length gives the poem a conversational, urgent, and direct tone that the message needs away from the slow and too arranged one. (61)

Throughout the poem, Hughes repeats the first-person pronoun 'I' six times as if he likes to tell his readers that he is the spokesperson of the Black community in America. The repetition implies that he, too, feels the bitterness of injustice and inequality confronted by people of color in American society. The use of the pronoun 'I' also suggests that the poet is an advocate of democracy and his poetry is a channel of communication through which he overtly gives voice to the voiceless and stands for the subjugated, not only in American society but everywhere in the globe where his poetry is read and heard.

### Conclusion

This paper has provided a critical reading of Langston Hughes' 'Democracy', indicating how the poet uses his poetic techniques to convey his themes, messages, ideas, and emotions. Among the technical devices employed by Hughes in the poem are rhyme, meter, enjambment, apostrophe, metaphor, and repetition. The poet expertly blends technical devices with thematic issues to portray the African American striving for freedom and justice in the United States, which shows itself as discriminatory and racially segregated. Through his inspiring use of imagery, structure, style, and technique, Hughes stresses the pressing need for equality and the demanding necessity for true democracy and freedom.

Not only does the poem reflect the historical reality of segregation and racial discrimination in American society, but it also voices the long-awaited hope that Democracy, though long postponed, is crucial to attain. Hughe's call to take action to accelerate the achievement of Democracy echoes through the lines, portraying the bitterness of Black Americans in their struggle against systemic prejudice and bigotry. To conclude, the detailed analysis of Hughes's 'Democracy', while focusing on the interaction of theme and technique, discloses how the poet's artistry gives voice to the aspirations of the oppressed while challenging the contradictions in American society.

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