

# How the Langston Hughes poem "I, Too" spotlights racial division

By The Smithsonian Institution, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.29.16

Word Count 808

Level 940L



American poet and writer Langston Hughes (1902-1967) pictured in 1945. Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images

On the wall of the newly opened National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., one sentence is carved into the stone: "I, too, am America."

The line comes from a poem, "I, Too" by African-American poet Langston Hughes. It was first published in 1926.

*I, too, sing America.*

*I am the darker brother.*

*They send me to eat in the kitchen*

*When company comes,*

*But I laugh,*

*And eat well,*

*And grow strong.*

*Tomorrow,*

*I'll be at the table*

*When company comes.*

*Nobody'll dare*

*Say to me, "Eat in the kitchen,"*

*Then.*

*Besides,*

*They'll see how beautiful I am*

*And be ashamed —*

*I, too, am America.*

*From "The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes." By permission of Harold Ober Associates Incorporated.*

The poem confirms the museum's mission to tell the history of United States through the eyes of the African-American experience. It embodies that history at a particular point in the early 20th century when Jim Crow laws in the southern United States enforced racial segregation.

Jim Crow laws were state and local laws enacted by white southerners after the Civil War was lost in 1865. The laws were designed both to make life difficult for blacks and to keep them separate from whites. The laws were used until 1965.

### **Capturing A Theme**

Hughes' poem captures themes about the relationship of African-Americans to the majority white culture and society of that time.

There is a play on words in the line, "I, too." If you hear the word as the number, "two," it makes you think of someone who is secondary, or even inferior.

The poem portrays African-Americans coming in from out of sight. It shows them taking their place at the dining room table as equals with the "company."

In the poem, the house represents the United States. Hughes refers to the African-Americans who worked in the plantation houses as slaves and servants. They lived below stairs or in the cabins, and were often made to keep out of sight of the slave owners. Still, the presence of African-Americans was obvious from the all the work they did to keep the house running smoothly.

### **Alternative Interpretation**

There is another way to hear "too" as "two" in the poem. The listener could think of "two" not meaning "secondary," but "divided in two."

With this, Hughes paid tribute to another writer of the time, the intellectual leader and founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, W.E.B. DuBois. He helped to empower the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-20th century.

According to DuBois in his book, "The Souls of Black Folks," the African-American existed always in two "places" at once. He says that black Americans feel a "two-ness" being both American and black. He says the two identities are at war with each other, but their strength keeps them from being torn in two.

The sense of being divided in two was not just a problem for African-Americans. It affected the entire United States. As President Lincoln said about trying to have both slavery and freedom in the same country, "A house divided against itself cannot stand."

### **Reference To Walt Whitman**

Hughes talks about unifying the separate parts of the American democracy with a reference to the great American poet of the 1800s, Walt Whitman.

Whitman wrote in one poem, "I sing the body electric." He connected the power of that body with all the good things about American democracy. Whitman saw each individual as having basic rights, and as having the power to work together with other citizens. Whitman believed that the "electricity" of the body formed a kind of glue that would tie people together in companionship and love. Another one of his poems begins, "I hear America singing ..."

Hughes references this line, in a more openly political way when he says, "I, too, sing America."

Hughes is talking about all the work that African-Americans provided to create America, which was understood, but never spoken about. African-Americans helped sing America into existence, and for that work they deserve a seat at the table, dining as equals.

### **Undergoing A Transformation**

At the end of Hughes' poem, he sings "I, too, am America." The line is changed because the transformation has occurred.

The presence of African-Americans has been established and recognized. The problem is that the simple statement, "They'll see how beautiful I am ..." may not be enough.

The new African-American museum on the National Mall is a powerful statement about the presence of a story that is a tragic, yet extremely important part of American history.