What Hughes’ powerful poem “I, Too” tells us about America

By David Ward, Smithsonian.com
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In large graven letters on the wall of the newly opened National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall is a quote from poet Langston Hughes' “I, Too, Am America.”

The line comes from the Hughes poem “I, Too,” 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.


The poem is a singularly significant affirmation of the museum’s mission to tell the history of the United States through the lens of the African-American experience. It embodies that history at a particular point in the early 20th century when Jim Crow laws throughout the South enforced racial segregation; and it argues against those who would deny that importance — and that presence.

Its mere 18 lines capture a series of intertwined themes about the relationship of African-Americans to the majority culture and society, themes that show Hughes’ recognition of the painful complexity of that relationship.

Tomorrow,
I’ll be at the table
When company comes.

There is a multi-dimensional pun in the title “I, Too” in the lines that open and close the poem. If you hear the word as the number two, it suddenly shifts the terrain to someone who is secondary, subordinate, even inferior.

Hughes powerfully speaks for the second-class, those excluded. The full-throated drama of the poem portrays African-Americans moving from out of sight, eating in the kitchen, and taking their place at the dining room table co-equal with the “company” that is dining.

Intriguingly, Langston doesn’t amplify on who owns the kitchen. The house, of course, is the United States and the owners of the house and the kitchen are never specified or seen because they cannot be embodied. Hughes’ sly wink is to the African-Americans who worked in the plantation houses as slaves and servants. He honors those who lived below stairs or in the cabins. Even excluded, the presence of African-Americans was made palpable by the smooth running of the house, the appearance of meals on the table, and the continuity of material life. Enduring the unendurable, their spirit lives now in these galleries and among the scores of relic artifacts in the museum’s underground history galleries and in the soaring arts and culture galleries at the top of the bronze corona-shaped building.

The other reference if you hear that “too” as “two” is not subservience, but dividedness.

Hughes pays homage to his contemporary, the intellectual leader and founder of the NAACP, W.E.B. DuBois, whose speeches and essays about the dividedness of African-American identity and consciousness would rivet audiences, and motivate and compel the determined activism that empowered the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-20th century.

The African-American, according to DuBois in his seminal work, "The Souls of Black Folks," existed always in two "places" at once:

“One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

DuBois makes the body of the African-American — the body that endured so much work and which is beautifully rendered in Hughes’ second stanza “I am the darker brother” — as the vessel for the divided consciousness of his people.

DuBois writes of the continual desire to end this suffering in the merging of this “double self into a better and truer self.” Yet in doing so, DuBois argued, paradoxically, that neither “of the older selves to be lost.”

The sense of being divided in two was not just the root of the problem not just for the African-American, but for the United States. As Lincoln had spoken about the coexistence of slavery with freedom: “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

Hughes ties together this sense of the unity of the separate and diverse parts of the American democracy by beginning his poem with a near direct reference to Walt Whitman.

Whitman wrote, “I sing the body electric” and went on to associate the power of that body with all the virtues of American democracy in which power was vested in each individual acting in concert with their fellows. Whitman
believed that the “electricity” of the body formed a kind of adhesion that would bind people together in companionship and love: “I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear ...”

Hughes makes Whitman — his literary hero — more explicitly political with his assertion “I, too, sing America.”

The verb here is important because it suggests the implicit if unrecognized creative work that African-Americans provided to make America. African-Americans helped sing America into existence, and for that work deserve a seat at the table, dining as coequals with their fellows and in the company of the world.

At the end of the poem, the line is changed because the transformation has occurred.

“I, too, am America.”

Presence has been established and recognized. The house divided is reconciled into a whole in which the various parts sing sweetly in their separate harmonies. The problem for the politics of all this, if not for the poem itself, is that the simple assertion of presence — “They’ll see how beautiful I am ...” — may not be enough.

The new African-American museum on the National Mall is a powerful assertion of presence and the legitimacy of a story that is unique, tragic and inextricably linked to the totality of American history. “I, Too” is Hughes at his most optimistic, reveling in the bodies and souls of his people and the power of that presence in transcendent change. But he fully realized the obstacles to true African-American emancipation and acceptance in the house of American democracy. He was the poet, remember, who also wrote “What will happen to a dream deferred?”
Multiple Choice Questions

(1) What are the two central ideas of the article?
A. The opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture is an important symbol in recognizing the struggles of African Americans; Langston Hughes’ poem “I, Too” describes the plight of the mistreatment of African-Americans throughout history.
B. The opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture is a significant event in American history; poets, like Langston Hughes and W.E.B. DuBois wrote poems that were very important.
C. Langston Hughes’ poem “I, Too” describes the plight of the mistreatment of African-Americans throughout history; the words “too” and “two” sound the same but have different meanings that can impact the interpretation of Hughes’ poem.
D. The opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture is an important symbol in recognizing the struggles of African-Americans; the words “too” and “two” sound the same but have different meanings that can impact the interpretation of Hughes’ poem.

(2) Read the following sentence from the article.

“The full-throated drama of the poem portrays African-Americans moving from out of sight, eating in the kitchen, and taking their place at the dining room table co-equal with the “company” that is dining.”

Does this sentence support the main idea of the article? Why or why not?
A. Yes, because it gives reasons why the line from the poem is on the museum.
B. Yes, because it summarizes the content of the poem.
C. No, because it does not describe what is in the museum.
D. No, because it does not explain the importance of the poem.

(3) Which answer choice BEST describes the article’s structure?
A. The article gives the chronological history of the struggle of African-Americans.
B. The article compares two different perspectives on a recent event.
C. The article gives a description with supporting background information.
D. The article describes the cause and effect of the treatment of African-Americans.

(4) What is the connection between the introduction [paragraphs 1-3] and the closing paragraph of the article?
A. Both recognize the importance of museums to educating the public about events in American history.
B. Both provide descriptions of how African-Americans were treated throughout American history.
C. Both give explanations of the significance of a line from Langston Hughes’ poem being engraved on the new museum.
D. Both give examples of how poetry is used to highlight the struggles of African-Americans throughout history.

Argumentative Writing Prompt

In your experience, has equality been reached in America? Explain why or why not. (BE SURE TO WRITE OVER ½ PAGE).