

The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain (1926) by Langston Hughes

1 One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a
2 poet--not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning
3 subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be
4 white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being
5 himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy
6 would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in
7 America--this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into
8 the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as
9 possible....

10 Certainly there is, for the American Negro artist who can escape the restrictions the more
11 advanced among his own group would put upon him, a great field of unused material ready for
12 his art. Without going outside his race, and even among the better classes with their "white"
13 culture and conscious American manners, but still Negro enough to be different, there is
14 sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work. And when he chooses
15 to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites in this country, with their innumerable
16 overtones and undertones surely, and especially for literature and the drama, there is an
17 inexhaustible supply of themes at hand. To these the Negro artist can give his racial
18 individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in
19 the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears....

20 The Negro artist works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding
21 from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites. "Oh, be respectable, write
22 about nice people, show how good we are," say the Negroes. "Be stereotyped, don't go too far,
23 don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you," say the
24 whites. Both would have told Jean Toomer not to write *Cane*. The colored people did not praise
25 it. The white people did not buy it. Most of the colored people who did read *Cane* hate it. They
26 are afraid of it. Although the critics gave it good reviews the public remained indifferent. Yet
27 (excepting the work of Du Bois) *Cane* contains the finest prose written by a Negro in
28 America....

29 So I am ashamed for the black poet who says, "I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet," as
30 though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world. I am ashamed, too, for
31 the colored artist who runs from the painting of Negro faces to the painting of sunsets after the
32 manner of the academicians because he fears the strange unwhiteness of his own features. An
33 artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what
34 he must choose.

35 Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the
36 Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near intellectuals until they listen and
37 perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing "Water Boy," and Rudolph Fisher writing about
38 the streets of Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron
39 Douglas's drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their
40 white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty. We
41 younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves
42 without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter.
43 We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored
44 people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build
45 our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free

1. The primary audience for this passage is

- a. ordinary Americans
- b. literary critics
- c. African American artists**
- d. All American writers
- e. all artists

ANS: C

Rationale: In this 1926 article, first published in The Nation, Langston Hughes urges young African-American artists to resist pressures from both blacks and whites to follow white artistic traditions. He considers such pressures to be destructive for Black writers. He offers examples of artists who successfully evoke experiences, language, and music of black people in order to create a new, energizing kind of art.

2. Throughout the passage, the speaker's attitude toward his anonymous young Negro poet can best be described as

- a. condescending and cruel
- b. complementary and proud
- c. critical and hopeful**
- d. ashamed and doubting
- e. disappointed and chastised

ANS: C

Rationale: The speaker's attitude toward the anonymous young Negro poet in this passage is complicated. There is certainly condescension and criticism present in Hugh's insistence that the poet's statement, "I want to be a poet--not a Negro poet," (lines 1-2) means, "I would like to be white" (lines 3-4). However, Hughes is hopeful that young black artists will turn to their own experiences for source material (lines 14, 17). He advocates for appreciating and celebrating the particular traits of African American character and culture to express the best kind of art (final paragraph).

3. The repetition of the word "meaning" in lines 2-4 indicates the rhetorical strategy of

- a. paradox
- b. anticipation
- c. argument
- d logic**
- e concession

ANS: D

Rationale: Hughes traces the emotional logic of this statement, "I want to be a poet--not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, 'I want to write like a white poet'; meaning subconsciously, 'I would like to be a white poet'; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white."

4. The title of the piece, and the phrase, "the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America (lines 6-7) use the rhetorical strategy of

- a. accumulation

- b. amplification
- c. euphemism
- d. allegory
- e. metaphor**

ANS: E

Rationale: Hughes compares the compound barriers of racial self-hatred and “American standardization” or assimilation to a metaphorical mountain that he and other black artists must climb, in order to “stand... free within ourselves” (lines 45-46).

5. In lines 24-28 Hughes uses the rhetorical strategy of _____ when he mentions Jean Toomer and Du Bois.

- a. ambiguity
- b. alliteration
- c. allusion**
- d. anaphora
- e. accumulation

ANS: C

Rationale: Lines 24-28 allude to two black writers that Hughes clearly admires. Cane is a 1923 novel by Jean Toomer. The novel is structured as a series of vignettes revolving around the origins and experiences of African Americans in the United States. W.E.B. Du Bois was an influential writer and educator. He was considered to be a mentor and spokesman for generations of black Americans. Both Toomer and Du Bois were key figures in the Harlem Renaissance, a time of prolific African-American cultural expressions that spanned the 1920s.

6. In the passage that begins, “Let the blare of Negro jazz bands” (lines 35-40), the speaker’s attitude toward advantaged black people can best be described as

- a. contemptuous**
- b. wary
- c. appreciative
- d. worshipful
- e. indifferent

ANS: A

Rationale: In this paragraph and throughout the passage, Hughes denigrates “the closed ears of the colored near intellectuals,” (line 36) and “the smug Negro middle class” (line 39). His tone is contemptuous of “the colored artist who runs from the painting of Negro faces to the painting of sunsets after the manner of the academicians because he fears the strange unwhiteness of his own features” (lines 30-32) and blacks who choose “white, respectable, ordinary books and papers” (line 40).

7. The final paragraph of the passage (lines 35-40) includes which of the following development strategies?

- a. quotation and commentary
- b. exemplification**
- c. argument and counterargument
- d. narrative
- e. comparison

ANS: E

Rationale: This paragraph is developed in part through exemplification of black artists who embrace African American culture in the expression of their art.

8. The repetition of sentences in lines 42-44 makes use of ____ for emphasis.

I repetition

II parallelism

III

a. I only

b. II only

c. I and II only

d. I and III only

e. I, II, and III

ANS: C

Rationale: The parallel structure and repetition of the same sentences in the concluding paragraph (“If white people are pleased we are glad... it doesn’t matter” in line 42, and “If colored people are pleased we are glad... it doesn’t matter” in lines 43-44) serve to emphasize ideas about individuality and staying true to oneself, regardless of what other people think.

Hughes expresses these ideas elsewhere in the article, when he asserts, “No great poet has ever been afraid of being himself” (lines 4-5), and, “An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he must choose.” (Lines 32-34).

Parallelism is similarity of structure a series of related words, phrases, or clauses. Repetition is repeating of a word, within a sentence or passage, in order to provide emphasis.