



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1979 Volume I: The Stranger and Modern Fiction: A Portrait in Black and White

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## The Stranger Redeemed: A Portrait of a Black Poet

Curriculum Unit 79.01.03  
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In the school of traditional criticism, the character that embodies ideal human virtues is considered the "hero" and other characters with opposite aims or virtues are labeled "villain." In many instances there may be a more universal figure who fits both modes of thought, appearing as both "hero" and "villain" or even "victim." This multi-faced individual is often referred to as "the stranger" within literary circles.

Of course there is no "true stranger" or no one would be able to sympathize with or understand his fate because of the bitterness and total alienation that the reader would feel. Yet to some degree that same bitterness and alienation is what makes the "stranger" believable.

It is the black "stranger" of modern fiction that the American culture has more recently decided to study. The black "hero" has gone through the customary gambit of reactions to a culture that rejects him. He has moved from the social situations of the North to those of the South in Jean Toomer's *Cane*, or vice-versa in those that took place in Richard Wright's *Native Son* or Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. These heroes could be compared to the hero of Louis-Ferdinand Celine's *Journey to the End of the Night*. However the experience would not be the same. Barmuk is white and Bigger's and Ellison's heroes are black. The situations might be comparable but the implications and social significance of the black novels would be much deeper.

White America has often written of blacks, but the result was more of a study of themselves as they saw blacks rather than of the actual portrayal of blacks. This is demonstrated in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*. Langston Hughes took up the theme of the ways in which whites attempted to mold blacks into their conceptions of blackness. This is, in fact, the major unifying theme of his collection of short fiction, *The Ways of White Folks*. He borrowed from his own life experiences to add depth and dimension to his characterization.

Langston Hughes wrote about what he knew best and being black was what he knew about. He gave to black characters a reality, a wholeness that was lacking in novels and poetry before. Hughes's characters became symbols of the deep South, the urban North, or any place under the sun where black Americans are found. He presented characters that not only avid readers, but large numbers of blacks, wanted to read about. At last a black writer was looked upon by the black masses as their favorite, not because the media proclaimed it, or the Literary Guild proclaimed it, but because the black people of America proclaimed it.

The stranger in Hughes is one who experiences deep desire and longing, but not unfulfillment. His characters are sufferers with redeeming graces. In his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, the stranger emerges in a young

boy, Sandy. Sandy shares a home in Kansas with his grandmother, known as Aunt Hagar, and her youngest daughter, Harriet. Sandy's father is a young good-looking wanderer who seldom provides for his family but can play a guitar and sing the blues with a passion. James Young in his book, *Black Writers of the Thirties*, states that *Not Without Laughter* is an important novel because it was one of the first by a black writer in which the life of common folk was examined on its own terms, not for its humor or propaganda value.

The family ruled by matriarchy is very real in American black culture. Blacks are neither apologetic about nor ashamed of this fact. It was forced upon black families by the institution of slavery; males were sold away more easily and the women were left to raise not only their children, but the master's children as well. In *Not Without Laughter*, Aunt Hagar is one of those strong black Christian women who behind a strong physical form hides a humble, understanding heart. It is she who tells little Sandy that laughter is important. But Sandy can't see why. Finally he sees a group of old black forgotten men laughing loudly one day. He reasons that poverty-stricken Negroes like Uncle Dan lived so long because to them no matter how hard life was, it was not without laughter.

Another theme that interests black people is religion. In Langston Hughes's novel *Tambourines to Glory*, two Harlem women find religion and a gold mine to go along with it. Meek Essie and wild Laura become the top preachers of a store-front Harlem church. Laura mixes the business of running the church with the pleasure of loving Buddy, a small-time crook.

Along with the motifs of religion and matriarchy found in his first two books, emerges that of the established black "stranger." It is not important whether the stranger is male or female. What is important is that the stranger is to his people an "everyman." He has faults, hopes, goals, troubles, and joys. He has opinions, thoughts and his own lifestyle. He may be on the brink of failure but he is not a failure. In his suffering, he finds redemption.

Hughes's poetry is also a vehicle for the black "stranger." The stranger respects religion and loves women. He loves life no matter how "unlovable" life is to him. Langston Hughes's "Blues" poems provide a path of escape for the stranger. The rhythm of the poems is musical enough to dance to. *The Weary Blues* is a collection of poems dedicated to Harlem musicians. Langston used to visit the nightclubs around New York in his youth. He was captivated by the piano players and the sultry singers. No other poets have come close to even imitating his style in musical poetry. His music poems are appropriately cast in free verse and often in the black idiom. The poems capture the bouncy rhythm and light-hearted exuberance of the music. The title poem of this collection centers on a Negro piano player who is singing the blues from his heart. Whites used to feel that blacks were always happy and carefree because they were always singing happy songs and spirituals. But Frederick Douglass pointed out the error of their thoughts. Douglass said that slaves sang most when they were the most unhappy. The songs of the slave represented the sorrows of his heart. <sup>2</sup> Therefore singing the blues does offer an escape, a temporary escape from a troubled world . . . a redemptive pause . . . a short stolen moment.

Significantly, the most important contribution of Hughes to American letters is the breaking down of the old boundaries of poetry in English. He infused it with a black sensibility independent of the received stereotypes and made it accommodate black themes and forms, idiom, and style. <sup>2</sup> The stranger appearing in Hughes's "Madam to You" collection can be compared to the neurotic stranger in T.S. Elliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" or to Ezra Pound's hero in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley."

All three poems deal with the problems of life. "Madam" is a trip through urban ghetto of black America,

"Mauberly" is a trip through the tough literary world of London during the Edwardian Age and "Prufrock" is a trip through the mind of a tortured being. "Madam," along with the other two poems, is life-sized. Madam Alberta K. Johnson holds tight to what she has. She uses her quick wit to put people in their places. She is not to be ignored, but reckoned with on her own terms. Mauberley is rude, brash, overly confident and has a deep superiority complex. Prufrock is fickle, confused and indecisive. Each poem is consistent in tone, strength, language and attitude; each poem explores its own turf adequately. You can see this in the different languages the "heroes" speak. Prufrock and Mauberley—active minds in inactive bodies—speak a stiff, polished English, while Madam uses her "get-down ghetto dialect." Of course each author presented the material in the way that he chose. Pound was into history, Eliot into psychology and Hughes into blackness.

Hughes never tried to imply that blacks were a super-race without faults. He was often criticized by his peers in the 1930s as helping to perpetuate low-life. He illuminated the seamy sides of black life as well as its more acceptable sides. It scarcely matters whether one approves or disapproves of such attitudes. They exist independently of any racial attitudes. Even Odysseus who is heroic and admirable also has some not-so-admirable characteristics; he is sometimes contemptible and selfindulgent, but yet he remains Odysseus. <sup>3</sup> A realistic portrayal of black characters (if it is to be of any real value) is bound to include both the good and the bad without making generalizations that such behavior is typical of any one race.

Another reason that black people place such high value on Hughes's works is that he has the ability to share common experiences. As a young man Hughes worked as a waiter in various nightclubs. Work was hard to find, so he often worked as a busboy on ships. His mother and father divorced while he was young. He did not become famous overnight. Often the prizes that he won for his poems were only worth a hundred dollars. But he kept writing. He was a very political person. He was his own person. He was first and foremost a Black American. With his pen he could do anything. He was primarily a poet. When a great poet like Hughes writes prose, his prose contains much poetry—rhythm, humor, pathos, picturesque language. He wrote about his people as he saw them, as he met them.

The stranger in Hughes is a person of vitality, of reality, and of hope. In Hughes the black stranger has truth, goals, a quest for life. Unlike William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, in which history is distorted, slandered and mocked, Hughes's works present characters with real needs and wants, messages for an oppressed people, a rich history and a folk heritage. The black stranger lives! He is laborer, doctor, lawyer, maid, mother, dancer, traveler, teacher and preacher. And he survives.

"Gather out of star-dust  
Earth-dust Cloud-dust,  
Storm-dust,  
And splinters of hail,  
One handful of dream-dust  
Not for sale." <sup>4</sup>

## LESSON PLANS

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Middle School-High School level (Grades 7-12, Reading Levels 5th-12th.)

### A. TEXTS *Selected Poems* by Langston Hughes

"Songs of Innocence" by William Blake

#### **Part One**

A critical look at poetry—rhyme patterns; free verse; subject matter; rhythm in Hughes, in Blake; picturesque language in Hughes, in Blake; sentence patterns; contractions and dialect; illustrations.

### B. TEXTS *Something in Common and Other Stories* by Langston Hughes

"Amy Foster" by Joseph Conrad

#### **Part Two**

A critical look at short stories—setting; minor characterization; thematic grouping; climax; symbolism; universality; add-a-chapter; retelling using different settings.

### C. TEXTS *Not Without Laughter* by Langston Hughes.

*Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein

#### **Part Three**

A critical look at the novel—setting; development of major characters; plot development; climax; protagonist and antagonist; recurring themes; symbolism; use of slang, dialect, other words; social significance; recommendations.

### D. TEXTS *The Big Sea* by Langston Hughes

#### **Part Four**

Biographical study of Langston Hughes—Early life, youth, parental influence, mother image; early travels, inclination to write; first poems, love life; favorite subjects.

## Notes

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1. Leslie Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare* , p. 15.
2. Onwuchekwa Jemie. *Langston Hughes* . p. 1.
3. Leslie Fiedler. *The Stranger in Shakespeare* . p. 59.
4. Langston Hughes. *Selected Poems* . "Dream Dust," p. 77.

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\_\_\_\_\_ *I Wonder as I Wander* . New York: Rinehart, 1956.

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