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A Pinch More Diversity: Langston Hughes and The Literary Canon

Olivia Hart Berlin
Bard College, ob7501@bard.edu

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A Pinch More Diversity: Langston Hughes and The Literary Canon

Senior Project submitted to
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by

Olivia Berlin

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Introduction

Throughout high school and college, I noticed that I scarcely ever read books by African American authors in school. Except for one course that I took that was about novels by African American authors, I usually only read one or two books by African American authors per course that I took if I read any books by African American authors for a course at all. Even more horrifying than that fact is the fact that if one of my classes had to not read one of the books that we had planned to read because we were behind most of the time the only or one of the two or three works by African American authors would end up being the one left on the cutting room floor as opposed to one of the many works we covered which were written by white authors.

This exclusion of African American authors from many high school and college courses seems to severely impact the knowledge of African American literature that the people that I know possess. I for one know that I can list off multiple great white poets such as Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and William Carlos Williams, but I can count the number of African American poets with whom I have familiarity on one hand and for most of them I cannot recall any poems that they have written. I have also found that when I mention names of famous African American poets in casual conversation I am often greeted by blank stares from the people around me. However, the instant that I mention names such as Sylvia Plath or Edgar Allan Poe most adults will nod in recognition and name a couple of their poems.

People's lack of knowledge when it comes to African American authors can probably be traced back to the fact that up to the middle of the twentieth century the American literary canon consisted almost entirely of white authors and even today most canonized authors are white. Since the word canon is so central to my project, I think that it is worth defining here. There are many definitions of the word canon, but only one of them is relevant to this project. The

definition of the word canon that is most relevant to this project is simple and hard to grasp in equal measures. The word canon's most simple definition is a group of literary texts that are deemed worthy of being taught to students and young children and of being studied by critics. The hard part of understanding the literary canon stems from the fact that words used to describe what belongs in the literary canon tend to be very abstract which leads to critics spending a lot of time quarreling about what should be included in it and excluded from it. The definition of the word canon provided by a website *Literary Devices: Definition and Examples of Literary Terms* shows just how broad the definition of the word canon is. It says about the word canon, "Secondly, students of literature use it to refer to the writings included in anthologies, or textbooks under certain genres, and thus are evaluated according to the genre under which they are placed. This meaning covers the entire literature generally thought as suitable for aesthetic admiration and academic use."¹ The definition of canon presented by *Literary Devices: Definition and Examples of Literary Terms* which is relevant to this project is writings that are deemed worthy of analysis in classes and of inclusion in anthologies. The only descriptors that are provided by this source to describe works that are deemed worthy of inclusion in the literary canon are two very broad ones. According to *Literary Devices: Definition and Examples of Literary Terms*, literary works that are included in the general canon must be aesthetically pleasing and worthy of being taught in a classroom setting.

This project studies the literary canon by looking at how one specific author, Langston Hughes, is cited in anthologies, which, according to Merriam-Webster, are collections of literary works which are selected for inclusion in that collection for a couple different reasons which will

¹ "Canon". *Literary Devices: Definition and Examples of Literary Terms*, <https://literarydevices.net/canon/>.

be discussed in the first chapter of this project.² Anthologies which are published in the United States serve as an important signifier of what literary works are included in the American literary canon which this project will focus on for two reasons. Firstly, they essentially function as lists of works of literature which should be seen as part of the American literary canon. Secondly, and most importantly, they often are the first place that a person encounters an author, so they establish what the world of literature looks like for most people. Two critics who wrote papers severely criticizing each other for their views about the literary canon Helen Vendler and Rita Dove at least seem to agree that the purpose of anthologies is to introduce people to new authors. Vendler says in “Are These the Poems to Remember?” which is a paper that she wrote criticizing *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* which Dove edited that people often encounter poems by different poets for the first time in anthologies. She states,

Anthologies are wonderful for the young: a single page catches fire, and a new attachment- sometimes a lifelong one - takes hold. And since space is limited, the famous poems understandably end up being the chosen ones: for Robert Hayden , “Mourning Poem for the Queen of Sunday,” “Those Winter Sundays,” “Frederick Douglas,” and Middle Passage”; for Robert Lowell, “To Speak of Woe That is in Marriage,” “Skunk Hour,” and “For the Union Dead”; for Marianne Moore, “The Fish” and “Poetry”. Coming as a young person to this anthology, I would have loved finding such poems.³

Vendler acknowledges that often young people look at anthologies to find new poets to read, so anthologies play a large role in establishing what poetry looks like for people. Because of the important role that anthologies play in establishing what the world of literature looks like, there often are only one to four frequently canonized poems by each poet in an anthology to enable editors to stuff more poets into them.

² “Anthology.” *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anthology>.

³ Vendler, Helen. “Are These the Poems to Remember?” *The New York Review of Books*, 2011, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/11/24/are-these-poems-remember/>.

Dove seems to agree with Vendler that anthologies play an important role in establishing what the literary canon looks like to the general public. In “Defending an Anthology”, she says about her process of editing *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth Century American Poetry*, “... my intent was to offer many of the best poems bound into books between 1900 and 2000 and to lend a helping hand to those readers wishing to strike out on their own beyond this selection”.⁴ Dove decided to include poems that had been published in other anthologies in her anthology to ensure that people who were new to poetry were familiar with the classic poets that are considered the most important in the American literary canon. However, she also included less anthologized poets in the anthology that she was editing so that more experienced readers could learn more about the diverse poems that are out there in the world.

This project focuses on Langston Hughes who was an African-American poet, novelist, essayist, anthologist, and translator in the early to mid twentieth century. This project will discuss poems that Hughes wrote and will explain why they are frequently canonized. Hughes seems to be frequently canonized, because he wrote in a similar style to and discussed similar ideas to writers who belonged to an art and literature movement called the Harlem Renaissance.

The Harlem Renaissance is an African-American art and literary movement that emerged in the 1920s and continued on throughout the first half of the twentieth century when Hughes did most of his writing. A critic named Glenn Jordan provides a clear definition of the Harlem Renaissance in the abstract of his paper “Re-Membering the African-American Past: Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas, and the Black art of the Harlem Renaissance”. He states,

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was part of the New Negro Movement that swept the USA in the early twentieth century. Through fiction, poetry, essays, music, theatre, sculpture, painting, and illustration, participants in this first Black arts movement

⁴ Dove, Rita. “Defending an Anthology.” *The New York Review of Books*, 2011, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/12/22/defending-anthology/>.

produced work that was both grounded in modernity and an engagement with African-American history, folk culture, and memory.⁵ According to Jordan, the Harlem Renaissance despite what people might think based on the name of it included all kinds of African American artists from across the United States. These artists including Hughes produced works that were similar to the works produced by artists from a larger movement called Modernism, which is defined by Lisi Schoenbach in a book she wrote *Pragmatic Modernism* which Kate Stanley quotes in her paper “Habits of Modernism”. She says, “modernism continues to be defined by its celebration of heroic opposition, its clean break from the past, its anti-institutional stand, and its emphasis on shock and radical discontinuity”.⁶ Modernism is defined, by Schoenbach, as a clean break from what literature usually looked like and from the expectations that publishers and critics had for literature. The Harlem Renaissance can be seen as a branch of Modernism, because it served as a break from how white people expected African American people to write. Instead of describing themselves according to stereotypes that white people had of them, Harlem Renaissance artists decided to describe African American people realistically. Harlem Renaissance artists focused on the history of African American people, music and folk tales produced by African American people throughout American history, and the impact that the atrocities of the past had on African American people during the first half of the twentieth century in their writing. Hughes fit into the Harlem Renaissance perfectly as a poet. He discussed African American history, music, and folk culture in depth throughout his writing.

⁵ Jordan, Glenn. “Re-Membering the African-American Past: Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas and Black art of the Harlem Renaissance.” *Cultural Studies*, vol. 25, no. 6, Taylor and Francis, 2011, pp. 848-891. *Taylor and Francis*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2011.605269>.

⁶ Stanley, Kate. “Habits of Modernism.” *Criticism*, vol. 56, no. 4, Wayne State University Press, 2014, pp. 854.

I will look at what Hughes and other critics think belongs in the general literary canon in the first half of my project to prove that literary movements matter when determining whether a work belongs in the literary canon or not. Then in the second half of my senior project, I will try to establish the connections between Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance by looking at the most anthologized poems which were written by Langston Hughes. I hope that by reading my project people will have a new appreciation for the importance of including a large group of literary works by a diverse group of authors in the literary canon.

The Importance of Aesthetic and Theme in the General Literary Canon

There are many critics and anthologists who have written about what authors and pieces of literature they think the American literary canon and anthologies printed in the United States should include and why they think that those works and writers should be included in them. They often disagree about what specific types of authors should be included in the American literary canon. However, there seems to be a consensus about the two main deciding factors for if a writer is important enough to be included in the general literary canon and anthologies: the style and themes of the literature that they produce. According to most critics, authors are more likely to be canonized if the works of literature that they produce are similar in style and themes to the work produced by their contemporaries though they seem to disagree about how many works fit those restrictions.

A couple of critics seems to suggest that only the style of a piece should be considered important when choosing a piece for inclusion in the American literary canon as opposed to both their style and themes like most critics do. Helen Vendler shows that the form of a piece matters more to her than its themes in “Are These Poems to Remember?” when she critiques Rita Dove for choosing to include a lot of African American poets alongside some famous white authors in *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. She states, “These writers are included in some cases for their representative themes rather than their style. Dove is at pains to include angry outbursts as well as artistically ambitious meditations”.⁷ Vendler thinks that how formal the structure of a piece of literature is is much more important than the themes of that literary work. She shows this by scoffing at Dove for choosing poems for inclusion in the anthology, because they discuss social issues that African American poets faced at the time that

⁷ Vendler, Helen. “Are These the Poems to Remember?” *The New York Review of Books*, 2011, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/11/24/are-these-poems-remember/>.

they wrote their poems. Despite considering the aesthetics of a piece to be highly important, Vendler never says what an aesthetically beautiful poem looks like to her. All that she will say is that a poem has to be beautiful to be accepted into the canon, and poems by African American poets just aren't to her.

Unlike Vendler, most critics choose poems to include in anthologies and the American literary canon, because the poet who wrote them both addressed similar themes and wrote in a similar way to writers who belonged to a literary movement which was prominent around the time that they were writing. The introduction of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* hints at the fact that the editors consider whether the style of and themes present in a work of literature resembles those present in other works of literature throughout history when selecting them for inclusion in their anthology. It shows that the editors considered both the style of and themes of a poem when selecting it for inclusion in their anthology when it explains why they included so many both very old and very new poems in *the Norton Anthology of Poetry*. The introduction states, "This book presents British and American poetry from before Chaucer to the present decade. At both ends of the chronological spectrum it is particularly ample, for the medieval is lyrically richer than is sometimes recognized, and the contemporary, denied the endorsement of tradition, merits a generous if tentative acceptance".⁸ The editors of this anthology included poems by British and American authors from across literary history in their anthology. They present excuses for including medieval and modern poems in their anthology, because they think that they have to in order to escape criticism. The main reason that these editors chose to include lots of medieval poetry in their anthology is because of its lyrical richness. They chide other critics for not recognizing its beauty and including it in their anthologies. They show hesitation

⁸ Eastman, Arthur M., et al, editors. "Preface." *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970. p. xxxix.

when it comes to accepting mid-twentieth century poetry probably, because, unlike poetry from other centuries it lacks a beautiful form and a strict meter.

A great example of the modern poems that the editor probably frowns upon for completely lacking rhythm and a narrative is a poem by a twentieth-century poet W.S. Merwin called, "Noah's Raven" which was written in the second half of the twentieth century. This is the poem, "Why should I have returned?/ My knowledge would not fit into theirs./ I found untouched the desert of the unknown,/ Big enough for my feet. It is my home./ It is always beyond them. The future/ Splits the present with the echo of my voice./ Hoarse with fulfillment, I never made promises".⁹ There are no rhymes or regular meter to speak of in this poem. Despite not liking this poem, the editors of the first edition of *The Norton Anthology of* seem to think that this poem is still important to include in his anthology perhaps because it shows a break with more formal structures in poetry which is very common in poetry from the twentieth century.

The editor seems to imply that how a poem is structured is one of the most important reasons that he and his editors chose poems for inclusion in their anthology by saying that they avoided trying to make older poetry more legible for readers if they thought it would have hidden important aspects of the poem. He explains, "Texts derive from authoritative editions but have been normalized in spelling and capitalization according to modern American usage-except in the many instances in which changes would significantly obscure meter or meaning".¹⁰ The editors changed the spelling and grammar of some of the oldest poems in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* to make them follow modern grammatical rules so they would be more legible to

⁹ Merwin, W.S. "Noah's Raven." *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, edited by Arthur M. Eastman, et al., 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970. p. 1174.

¹⁰ Eastman, Arthur M., et al, editors. "Preface." *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970. p. xxxix.

modern readers. However, they avoided doing that most of the time, because it would have destroyed the wording or meter of the original poem.

One of the poems that the editors of the first edition of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* chose to leave unchanged for the sake of its form is the first poem included in the anthology which is an anonymous poem from either the thirteenth or the fourteenth century “Now Go’th Sun Under Wood”. This is the poem with the grammar and spelling from the time that it was written, “Nou goth sonne under wode-/ Me reweth, Marie, thi faire rode./ Nou goth sonne under tre-/Me reweth, Marie, thi sonne and the.”¹¹ This poem features a regular meter, end rhymes, and alliteration throughout the poem which would be lost if it was translated into modern English. The poem is made up of two iambic rhyming couplets which would be ruined if the poem were translated into modern English. There is also alliteration in the poem in phrases like “Me reweth, Marie” and “thi sonne and the” that would be completely lost in modern English, since the word me would be translated into the word I and the word the would be translated into the word you. The editor of this poem does include a translation of the poem into modern English in case people need help understanding what the poem says, but they make sure that readers encounter the original version of the poem before reading the translation. The fact that these editors made the decision to include an unaltered version of this poem in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* shows that they included the medieval poems in their anthology, because of the style that they were written in as well as because of the themes that they discussed.

Guido A. Podestà discusses the idea that critics think that works that are included in the literary canon have to be similar to works produced by other authors who were writing at the same time as them in “An Ethnographic Reproach to the Theory of the Avant-Garde: Modernity

¹¹ Eastman, Arthur M., et al, editors. “Now Go’th Sun Under Wood.” *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970. p. 3.

and Modernism in Latin America and the Harlem Renaissance.” in 1991. He stated that critics often only canonize modernist literature that is similar to the literature produced by European modernists, but he hoped like the author of this project that that would change eventually. He explains at the very beginning of his paper, “In literature, to compare still means to study the influence of European paradigms on native texts, or to interpret ‘ethnographic texts’ in the light of European theories”.¹² The only works of modernist literature that were considered worth being compared to other works of modernist literature in the early 1990s were works of modernist literature that showed traits of European modernism. Podestà states that the definition of modernism is a literary movement that studies how industrialization and political change impacts a culture. He says that European critics refused to believe that African Americans and Latin Americans had enough independence to be considered modernists for most of the twentieth century. He states that, “Non-European citizens were not considered subjects of enunciation and their statements and artifacts remain unnoticed. Rather than citizens they were political subjects in an environment where colonialism still prevailed”.¹³ According to Podestà, Europeans in the beginning of the twentieth century did not believe that non-European nations could be considered independent nations. They still saw citizens of non-European countries and ethnic minorities within the United States as colonists that people of European descent ruled over and didn’t pay attention to their culture or any of the literature that they produced. Not only is treating non-European people like that extremely racist, it also means that modernist texts by authors who aren’t white were not considered modernist for decades after they were written and

¹² Podestà, Guido A., “An Ethnographic Reproach to the Theory of the Avant-Garde: Modernity and Modernism in Latin America and the Harlem Renaissance.” *MLN*, vol.106, no. 2, hispanic issue, John Hopkins University Press, 1991. Jstor, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/290486>. p. 395.

¹³ Podestà, Guido A., “An Ethnographic Reproach to the Theory of the Avant-Garde: Modernity and Modernism in Latin America and the Harlem Renaissance.” *MLN*, vol.106, no. 2, hispanic issue, John Hopkins University Press, 1991. Jstor, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/290486>. p. 400.

therefore were not considered worthy of canonization, anthologization, or even critical study for most of the twentieth century.

The rejection of their history and culture by European people and the fact that European critics only tended to accept writing that looked like their own was particularly troubling for Harlem Renaissance writers like Hughes according to Houston A. Baker who Podestà quotes, because these writers were actively trying to not write like Caucasian people and facing the truth that if they wrote the way that they wanted to write then they probably would not get canonized or even published. Podestà states,

Modernist 'anxiety' in Afro-American culture does not stem - says Houston A. Baker - "from a fear of replicating outmoded forms or of giving way to bourgeois formalisms. Instead, the anxiety of modernist influence is produced, in this first instance, by the black spokesperson's necessary task of employing extant audible forms in ways that move clearly up, masterfully and re-soundingly away from slavery."¹⁴

According to Baker, Harlem Renaissance writers did not focus on writing in an informal manner or moving away from writing about upper class people like modernists of European descent did. They produced writing inspired by songs that their ancestors had sung during slavery and blues music to try to move away from writing like white people and purposefully avoided leaning into the stereotypes that other races had of them in their writing.

Langston Hughes agreed with Podestà at least as a young man. His understanding that critics only accepted works of literature by African-American people seems to be one of the reasons that he helped to establish the Harlem Renaissance in the early 1920s.¹⁵ According to Hughes, African-American writers had to write like a white person to be accepted into the

¹⁴Podestà, Guido A., "An Ethnographic Reproach to the Theory of the Avant-Garde: Modernity and Modernism in Latin America and the Harlem Renaissance." *MLN*, vol.106, no. 2, hispanic issue, John Hopkins University Press, 1991. Jstor, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/290486>. p. 400.

¹⁵ Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain: Essay on Poetic Theory." *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69395/the-negro-artist-and-the-racial-mountain>.

American literary canon or even by the general public in the early twentieth century. This outside pressure led to a desire among the African-American community of America to act white to the point of almost being white which Hughes discusses in the beginning of an essay that he wrote about why the Harlem Renaissance developed “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”. He states, “But this is a mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America - this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible”.¹⁶

Hughes says that African-American artists are prevented from producing great art which he defines as art which is created without worrying about it being similar to literature produced by their contemporaries by a desire they have to produce art that is similar to that created by white people.¹⁷ He portrays acting like an American and acting like an African American as two very different things and says that African American artists including writers tend to avoid creating art like an African-American whatever that means because society tells them that they should avoid making it.

Even though it is possible to believe from the previous quote that a pressure on African American artists to act white mainly came from other African American people, Hughes shows that it didn't only come from them later on in the same essay. According to Hughes, the pressure to act white came from both the rest of the African American community and from white critics and publishers. He explains, “The Negro artist works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites. ‘O, be

¹⁶ Hughes, Langston. “The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain: Essay on Poetic Theory.” *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69395/the-negro-artist-and-the-racial-mountain>.

¹⁷Hughes, Langston. “The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain: Essay on Poetic Theory.” *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69395/the-negro-artist-and-the-racial-mountain>.

respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are,' says the Negroes. 'Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you,' say the whites."¹⁸ Most African American artists in the 1920s were told both by their own community and by white people to write about similar topics to white people. They were told to avoid discussing problems that only African American people face by both groups. They were begged by African American people to write about people that were like the white people that appeared in literature written at the time and told by white people that they would pay them for writing about African American people who fitted into the stereotypes that white people had about African American people.

Hughes worked with other African-American artists to create the Harlem Renaissance, so it would be possible for African American artists to avoid having to produce works that were similar to those produced by their white contemporaries. He explains the mindset of himself and other Harlem Renaissance artists' at the end of "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain". He explains, "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure does not matter either."¹⁹ African-American artists including Hughes created the Harlem Renaissance, so they could have more freedom to write about what they wanted to write about. They made the decision to stop trying to get included in the American literary canon and trying to become

¹⁸ Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain: Essay on Poetic Theory." *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69395/the-negro-artist-and-the-racial-mountain>.

¹⁹ Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain: Essay on Poetic Theory." *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69395/the-negro-artist-and-the-racial-mountain>.

popular with their own race, so that they could write about African American people realistically. They became very popular overtime, but they weren't sure that they would at least initially because they were consciously avoiding writing like white authors who were writing at the same time as them and being published and canonized and decided to take the risk of not getting support for their writing from anyone else to be true to themselves.

Critics that talk about the American literary canon tend to form two camps who either believe that the general literary canon should consist of a tiny select group of authors or who believe that the general literary canon should consist of many authors who show the diversity that can be found in each literary movement from history. John Irwin and Helen Vendler both belong to the former camp. It is hinted at by Gary Lee Stonum that John Irwin belongs to this group, because of the large amount of space that he is willing to devote to individual authors that he talks about in *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance*.²⁰ Gary Lee Stonum reports that Irwin devotes eleven chapters of that book to talking about Poe.²¹ If Irwin thinks that it is wise to devote eleven chapters to a single author in a book about a whole literary movement then he must see the American literary canon as something that should be very limited. Vendler explicitly states that she only believes that a small number of authors deserve to belong in the American literary canon. She states in "Are These Poems to Remember?" that, "No century in the evolution of poetry in English ever had 175 poets worth reading, so why are we being asked to sample so many poets of little or no

²⁰ Stonum, Gary Lee, "Undoing Literary History." *Diacritics*, vol. 11, no. 3, John Hopkins University Press, 1981, pp. 2-12

. Jstor, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464510>.

²¹ Stonum, Gary Lee, "Undoing Literary History." *Diacritics*, vol. 11, no. 3, John Hopkins University Press, 1981, p. 9

. Jstor, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464510>.

lasting value? Anthologists may now be extending to general a welcome.”²² She criticizes Rita Dove for the sheer number of poets that she includes in *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Vendler thinks that it is important that the poets included in the American literary canon are able to hold onto a place in that canon and retain popularity overtime. She states that she believes that very few twentieth century poets will be able to achieve that. However, Vendler fails to acknowledge that it is impossible to know for sure if poems written in the last hundred years will be able to hang onto popularity and critical acclaim for a long time, since it is almost impossible to understand what critics will think belongs in the American literary canon in the future.

Gary Lee Stonum, Guido A Podestà, Rita Dove, and Langston Hughes all believe that a diverse group of authors who belong to each literary movement should be canonized in order to develop a more accurate understanding of what writing from each literary movement that has existed through out American and British literary history looks like. Stonum seems shocked that Irwin doesn't write about a wide variety of authors in *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance*. He shows those views of his in one sentence of “Undoing Literary History”. He states that, “Irwin rather flaunts the reversal, nominally bestowing eleven chapters on Poe but only five in all on Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville.”²³ Stonum seems surprised that Irwin devotes eleven chapters to one author and about a chapter to all others. He probably thinks that each author should have a equal space amount of space devoted to them. He protests Poe being included in the book at all,

²² Vendler, Helen. “Are These the Poems to Remember?” *The New York Review of Books*, 2011, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/11/24/are-these-poems-remember/>.

²³ Stonum, Gary Lee, “Undoing Literary History.” *Diacritics*, vol. 11, no. 3, John Hopkins University Press, 1981, p. 9
. Jstor, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464510>.

because he believes that Poe is a Gothic not Romance author.²⁴ However, he seems to still consider him worthy of inclusion in the American literary canon just as a member of a different literary movement.

Podestà is part of a group of critics who are trying to getting more of a variety of texts from another literary movement modernism accepted into the general literary canon. He opens “An Ethnographic Reproach to the Theory of the Avant-Garde: Modernity and Modernism in Latin America and the Harlem Renaissance.” by talking about the importance of studying minor modernist literature from the Americas. Podestà seems to think that it is important to canonize Harlem Renaissance writers and other modernists who aren’t Caucasian, because their writing looks so different from that of European modernists who throughout the twentieth century were seen as the only genuine Modernists and because it is wrongly assumed by many critics that Modernist writing produced by non-European modernist writers was almost identical to that produced by European writers. He states,

Perhaps it would be more beneficial to recognize that modernism was inscribed and shaped differently within and without Europe, and that modernity was above all a productive desire. Likewise, the homologous relationship between modernity and modernism can be challenged by means of counter-examples: societies where, in the absence of modernity, modernism had developed; and societies where, in the presence of modernity, ethnic minorities were excluded from modernity and its public spheres.²⁵

According to Podestà, European modernism and American modernism looked very different from modernism from non-European countries. Additionally, in Europe and the United States, modernism developed in response to modernity, which Encyclopedia Britannica provides a pretty clear definition of, but modernism from other countries didn’t. Encyclopedia Britannica says,

²⁴ Stonum, Gary Lee, “Undoing Literary History.” *Diacritics*, vol. 11, no. 3, John Hopkins University Press, 1981, p. 9

. Jstor, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464510>.

²⁵Podestà, Guido A., “An Ethnographic Reproach to the Theory of the Avant-Garde: Modernity and Modernism in Latin America and the Harlem Renaissance.” *MLN*, vol.106, no. 2, hispanic issue John Hopkins University Press, 1991. Jstor, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/290486>. p. 401.

“Modernity, the self-definition of a generation about its own technological innovation, governance, and socioeconomics. To participate in modernity was to conceive of one’s society as engaging in organizational and knowledge advances that make one’s immediate predecessors appear antiquated or, at least, surpassed.”²⁶ Literary works by European modernists usually included references to modernity, which can be defined as technological, social, and governmental advancements that make life in previous centuries seem antiquated, but other modernists often didn’t reference those advancements because they either were not experiencing them or were not benefitting from them. These modernist authors either lived in a country that wasn’t experiencing modernity, or were viewed as less than by the ruling majority of their country and therefore didn’t reap the benefits of the modernity that was present in their home country. Since they were not focused on modernity, the modernist writers in countries other than Europe and the United States produced writing that looks vastly different from those produced by European modernists and Caucasian modernists from the United States. These modernists who were not of European descent should be studied, according to Podestà, to establish a more thorough understanding of modernism.

Dove expresses her seemingly complete agreement with Podestà about what should be included in the American literary canon in the beginning of “Defending an Anthology” where she directly responds to Vendler saying that she chose to include too many authors in her anthology. She explains that she thinks that it is important to expose people to a wide variety of literature and criticizes critics like Vendler who select a small group of authors for canonization in the American literary canon. She proclaims,

... *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* is not meant to be an in-depth scholarly study of pick-your-ism; it is a gathering of poems its editor finds

²⁶ Snyder, Sharon L. “Modernity”. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/modernity>.

outstanding for a variety of reasons, and by no means all of them in adherence to my own aesthetic taste buds; my intent was to offer many of the best poems bound into books between 1900 and 2000 and to lend a helping hand to these readers wishing to strike out on their own beyond this selection.²⁷

Dove picked out the poems for her anthology that she found to be great pieces of literature for many different reasons not just for the small amount of reasons that other poets pick poems for inclusion in anthologies. She saw the poems that were anthologized in the twentieth century as great but she also wanted to give people access to other poems that were different from the ones most often studied in the twentieth-century. Dove openly criticized poets who only chose to anthologize a small group of poets. She accused them of picking poems because they like them not because they think that they are scholarly important.

Dove expresses her opinion that diversity is valuable in the literary canon in a direct criticism that she offers of Vendler's own books and essays. She criticizes Vendler for including too few authors in the literary canon and by extension seems to criticize all of the critics who think like her. She says, "Whoa! I suppose Vendler would rather I declare a Top Ten, or perhaps just five, as she herself did in her recent scholarly study *Last Looks, Last Books*. Indeed, one of her own forays into the anthology turf, *The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry* (1985), prompted a disgruntled reader to retort on amazon.com: 'The American Tree becomes a Toothpick.'²⁸ Vendler is an extreme example of the camp of critics who think that the American literary canon should be very limited. According to Dove, Vendler thinks that there are only ten twentieth-century poets who should be considered canon which is shocking to many modern-day critics and readers including Podestà and Dove. Dove and the general public are upset by

²⁷ Dove, Rita. "Defending an Anthology." *The New York Review of Books*, 2011, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/12/22/defending-anthology/>.

²⁸ Dove, Rita. "Defending an Anthology." *The New York Review of Books*, 2011, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/12/22/defending-anthology/>.

Vendler's view of the literary canon, because it cuts away all of the literary work that makes the American literary canon full of diversity leaving it boring and static.

Like Dove and Podestà, Hughes chooses a wide variety of authors to include in the anthologies that he edits, because he wants to expose the general public to a wide variety of authors. He edits anthologies that just include African American authors as opposed to anthologies that try to cover all twentieth-century American poetry like Dove, but his anthologies contain just as much diversity as *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. He makes his goals while editing anthologies clear in his introduction to one of his anthologies *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* which came out in the 1960s. He states,

Here they reveal their thoughts, their emotions, direction and indirections over three quarters of a century - from Chesnutt, and Dunbar, Wright, Ellison and Williams, to the new young writers of the sixties, Lindsay Patterson, Robert Boles, and Alice Walker; from the fright and the violence of the Deep South to the tinkle of iced drinks at an interracial party in Boston; from the twisted face of a black sharecropper to the spotlighted smile of a Harlem dancer, from tragedy to comedy, laughter to tears, these storied culled from the best of N* writing over the years, indicate how varied, complex, and exciting is the milieu in which black folk live in america.²⁹

Hughes includes a large group of short stories written throughout the twentieth century in *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers*. He includes short stories about a wide variety of themes written by African American people from different states and classes in that anthology. The reason why he includes such a diverse group of stories in his anthology is that he has reached the reasonable conclusion that if he includes a large group of unique short stories in this anthology and all of the other anthologies that he edited throughout his life then people will develop a more realistic understanding of how differently individual African American people live and how different their literature looks.

²⁹ Hughes, Langston, editor. "Preface." *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers: An Anthology from 1899 to the Present*, Little, Brown, 1967, p. XIII.

Most critics agree that the style of and theme of a work of literature is what decides whether it belongs in the literary canon or not. They also all seem to agree that the deciding factor of whether or not a literary work belongs in the general literary canon is how much it aligns with literary movements of its day. For example, it seems like Hughes is frequently canonized because he wrote in a similar style at the beginning of his career to other writers in the Harlem Renaissance literary movement. How much writers needs to align with those literary movements is up for debate however. It is probably best that how much works of literary movements need to line up with literary movements is kept to a minimum, so critics and the general public can have a more accurate understanding of how people were writing throughout history and so people can get a wider understanding of what literature from each literary movement looks like.

Langston Hughes's Canonization as a Important Harlem Renaissance Writer

Langston Hughes is frequently included in American anthologies which anthologize poetry. Different poems by Hughes are included in different anthologies. However, there is a group of about four poems that are by far the poems that are most included in anthologies that include Langston Hughes as a poet. This chapter will analyze Hughes's most anthologized poems to try to determine why they are considered worthy of anthologization by the editors of those anthologies. These four poems "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", "The Weary Blues", "Harlem", and "Harlem Sweeties" seem to have been frequently included in anthologies, because they tackle similar subjects to those discussed in works of literature by other Harlem Renaissance writers.

Glenn Jordan clearly established Hughes as member of the Harlem Renaissance in "Remembering the African-American Past: Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas and Black art of the Harlem Renaissance". He explains that writers in the Harlem Renaissance focused on the social issues that they and other African American people faced throughout the twentieth century, African American and African history, and their pride in their identity as African American people in their writing. He says that that Harlem Renaissance artists were not in complete agreement on what political issues they should focus on as a literary movement. Jordan says after outlining the four main ideas for what African American people should strive for socially that were prevalent at the beginning of the twentieth century,

...The New Negroes *did not subscribe to a single political philosophy*. It is true that they would have all have been united in opposition to the accommodationist aspect of Booker T. Washington's conservative Black nationalism - that is they would have been more inclined to the militant civil rights agenda of Frederick Douglas and W.E.B Du Bois, the

pan-Africanist perspective of Marcus Garvey (minus his flamboyant style) or the socialist workingman's agenda of leaders like A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen.³⁰ New Negroes which was what the group of African American people who participated in the Harlem Renaissance called themselves believed that African Americans in the United States should focus on several different social goals. They either believed that African Americans should try to achieve civil rights, try to reconnect with and help people who lived in Africa, and that they should form unions and struggle against human rights violations in the work place. It is worth noting that not all artists in the Harlem Renaissance believed that all of those goals were worth achieving the only thing that they all agreed on when it comes to their social goals is that they no longer wanted African American people to accept that they were less valuable than white people.

According to Jordan, the most important thing to all members of Harlem Renaissance was that African American artists felt free to create the type of art that they wanted to make and felt proud of their identity as African American people. He states, "...all of these perspectives could be appropriated by New Negroes, as they all emphasized *pride, dignity* and, as it was put at the time, '*uplifting the race*'".³¹ Jordan says that the artists in the Harlem Renaissance's main shared goal was to help other African American people be more proud of their identity and help other African American people think of themselves as equal to white people. It seems from Hughes's poetry that the main goals that he wanted to achieve through his writing was to connect to African American history and culture, to feel reconnected to Africa, and to achieve civil rights for African Americans like other Harlem Renaissance writers.

³⁰ Jordan, Glenn. "Re-Membering the African-American Past: Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas and Black art of the Harlem Renaissance." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 25, no. 6, Taylor and Francis, 2011, p. 857.

³¹ Jordan, Glenn. "Re-Membering the African-American Past: Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas and Black art of the Harlem Renaissance." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 25, no. 6, Taylor and Francis, 2011, p. 857.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is Langston’s Hughes most anthologized poem. It appears in nine out of the fifteen anthologies consulted for this project. It is interesting to note that even though this poem appears frequently in general anthologies of American literature and poetry. It does not appear in anthologies of African American literature created during Hughes’s lifetime other than an anthology that he edited. The same is true for two of the other poems by Hughes that are often included in general anthologies of poetry “Harlem” and “Harlem Sweeties”. It is possible that anthologies of American and British poetry and literature in the second half of the twentieth century and the twenty-first century and anthologies of African American literature written in the first half of the twentieth century tend to contain different poems by Hughes, because of what the editors’ purposes for those anthologies were. It seems possible that the anthologies that were written by African American critics during Hughes lifetime, like *Anthology of American Negro Literature* which was published in 1929 and *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746 - 1949: An Anthology* which was published in 1949, were written with the intention of trying to expose African American writers to other critics and the general public so that they could get widely published and canonized.

Gwendolyn Brooks shows that editors of those anthologies did not see themselves as people who were capable of deciding which authors got included in the American literary canon in the introduction to an anthology *New Negro Poets, U.S.A.* that Hughes edited in 1964. She states, “Success is not the reward of every effort. But there is enough magic, enough sure flight, enough meaningful strength to inspire a happy surmise that here are some of the prevailing stars of an happy tomorrow”.³² It seems strange for someone who is writing an introduction to an anthology to say that she hopes that the people that the editor of the anthology choose to include

³² Brooks, Gwendolyn. “Preface.” *New Negro Poets U.S.A*, edited by Langston Hughes, Indiana University Press, 1964, p. 14.

in it become popular and critically acclaimed, because it seems to imply that she thinks being in an anthology of African American poetry in the mid twentieth century does not mean that a writer has achieved either of those things and editors of anthologies of British and American poetry always seem assured that being included in an anthology is a form of being included in the American literary canon.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” discusses the history of African American people by talking about the rivers that that have lived alongside during major positive events in their history to remind African American people of everything that their ancestors have accomplished throughout history. It discusses the beginnings of civilization along the Congo and Euphrates rivers, the building of the pyramids along the Nile river, and the process of ending slavery in the Southern United States.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” serves as an attempt by Hughes to connect to his ancestors who were African and who were possibly a part of powerful ancient civilizations. He uses the first line of the poem “I’ve known rivers”³³ which is repeated three times throughout the poem to show that he feels connected to his ancestors. The narrator feels so connected to his ancestors that he feels a degree of familiarity with the lands that they inhabited. The narrator connects with his ancestors in tactile, auditory, kinesthetic, and visual ways. He says,

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I hear the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to Orleans, ...³⁴

³³Hughes, Langston. “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, First Vintage Classics Edition, Estate of Langston Hughes, 1994, p. 23.

³⁴ Hughes, Langston. “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, First Vintage Classics Edition, Estate of Langston Hughes, 1994, p. 23.

The narrator of “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” describes bathing, building, and seeing in ancient times and being alive when Abraham Lincoln decided to end slavery when quite obviously he was not there in person for any of those things. The use of the collective “I” in *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* might be a minor reason why this poem is anthologized so much. Micheal Skansgaard states that Hughes was partially inspired by spirituals to use the collective “I” in his poetry in “The Virtuosity of Langston Hughes: Persona, Rhetoric, and Iconography in *The Weary Blues*”. He states, “And in its last line, ‘My soul has grown deep like the rivers’ (1:36), Hughes’s poem evokes simultaneously the collective voice of spirituals and Whitman’s (1855:55) plural selfhood:”.³⁵ Skansgaard specifically says that Hughes uses plural selfhood in the last line of this poem, but he actually uses it throughout “The Weary Blues”. Critics might feel drawn to how this poem shows the pride in his race that Hughes shares with other artists from the Harlem Renaissance through him getting inspiration from spirituals for this poem when they select this poem for inclusion in anthologies.

Hughes shows that this interpretation of his poem is valid in his autobiography *The Big Sea*. He came up with the idea for “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” when he crossed the Mississippi while traveling by train to speak to his estranged father. He recalls,

... and I began to think what that river, the old Mississippi, had meant to Negroes in the past - how to be sold down the river was the worse fate that could overtake a slave in times of bondage. Then I remembered reading how Abraham Lincoln had made a trip down the Mississippi on a raft to New Orleans, and how he had seen slavery at its worst, and had decided within himself that it should be removed from American life. Then I began to think about other rivers in our past - The Congo, and the Niger, and the Nile in

³⁵ Skansgaard, Micheal. “The Virtuosity of Langston Hughes: Persona, Rhetoric, and Iconography in *The Weary Blues*.” *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 81, no. 1, U of Washington, 2020, p. 68. *Duke University Press*, <https://read.dukeupress.edu/modern-language-quarterly/article-abstract/81/1/65/152222/The-Virtuosity-of-Langston-Hughes-Persona-Rhetoric?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

Africa - and the thought came to me: "I've know rivers," ... as the train gathered speed in the dusk, I had written this poem, which I called "The Negro Speaks of Rivers."³⁶ When Hughes was traveling over the Mississippi River to visit his estranged father, he thought about how it had been the site of extremely positive and extremely negative moments in African American history. He thought about the fact that slaves were sold down the Mississippi to more brutal and dehumanizing enslavement and that Abraham Lincoln saw slavery on the Mississippi river which made him decide to fight for the freedom of the slaves in the American South. He also thought of the rivers that his ancestors had lived near in Africa when they were a part of powerful ancient civilizations which made him feel a kinship with his ancestors and made him come up with the first line of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers".

Hughes's desire to connect with his ancestors which is shown in this poem is probably the main reason why it is anthologized so much. Jordon claims that Hughes shares these desires with the other artists in the Harlem renaissance. He states, "Langston Hughes, however, like a number of other New Negro thinkers and writers, was a pan-Africanist. Thus, the experience and memory of the collective Black subject in his writing often include Africa".³⁷ According to Jordon, Hughes like a bunch of other artists from the Harlem Renaissance wanted to feel connected to his ancestors who had lived in Africa. For that reason, he explored African history in several of his poems. The fact that he shows a value that he shares with other Harlem Renaissance writers in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" probably encouraged critics to canonize this poem.

³⁶ Parham, Marisa. "Hughes, Cullen, and the In-sites of Loss." *ELH*, vol. 74, no. 2, John Hopkins University Press, 2007, pp. 429 - 447. *Project Muse*, doi:10.1353/elh.2007.0017.

³⁷ Jordan, Glenn. "Re-Membering the African-American Past: Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas and Black art of the Harlem Renaissance." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 25, no. 6, Taylor and Francis, 2011, p. 864.

“The Weary Blues” is Langston Hughes’s second most anthologized poem. It is included in eight of the fifteen anthologies looked at for this project. Unlike Hughes’ other most anthologized poems, it appears in both general anthologies of poetry published in the second half of the 20th century and the 21st century, such as the *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, and in some anthologies of African American literature published in Hughes’s lifetime like *Anthology of American Negro Literature* which was published in 1929. All of the publishers of these anthologies seem to seem the value of “The Weary Blues” since it is strongly connected to both African American music and the social issues that African American people faced in the first half of the twentieth century. “The Weary Blues” is about a person in a club in Harlem watching a blues singer singing about his troubles and playing a piano. When the singer goes home for the night, the song that he has been singing stays in his head which makes it clear that it is not just a song, but a reflection of his feelings about life.

Hughes uses many elements of a blues song in “The Weary Blues” according to Steven C. Tracy who wrote about “The Weary Blues” in “To the Tune of Those Weary Blues: The Influence of the Blues Tradition in Langston Hughes’s Blues Poems”. He says that the structure of the second group of lines that Hughes uses for lyrics of the blues song that the man in the poem is singing are structured similarly to the early blues lyrics that Hughes would have heard when he was growing up.³⁸ These lines of the poem are,

“I got the Weary Blues
 And I can’t be satisfied
 Got the Weary Blues

³⁸ Tracy, Steven C. “To the Tune of Those Weary Blues: The Influence of the Blues Tradition in Langston Hughes’s Blues Poems.” *MELUS*, vol. 8, no. 3, Oxford University Press, 1981, pp. 73-98. *Jstor*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/467538>

And can't be satisfied -

I ain't happy no mo'

And I wish that I had died."³⁹

These lines form a pair of couplets that say almost the exact same thing, and a third couplet which presents a similar, but much more intense idea to the other two couplets. It has an ending rhyme scheme of ABABAB. Tracy compares Hughes' "lyrics" to the lyrics to a song called 'Texas Worried Blues' by a blues musician named Henry Thomas. Those lyrics go:

The worried blues

God, I'm feeling bad.

I've got the worried blues

God, I'm feeling bad.

I've got the worried blues

God, I'm feeling bad.⁴⁰

Like the three couplets that form Hughes's "lyrics", the three couplets in these lyrics are identical. They also form a ABABAB end rhyme scheme and discuss a similar topic to Hughes' "lyrics" namely overwhelming negative feelings.

"The Weary Blues" is probably selected for inclusion in anthologies, because it is inspired by blues music. According to Tracy, Hughes is admired by critics, because of how he seems respectful of the blues music that he grew up with and the musicians that produced it.

Tracy states,

³⁹ Hughes, Langston. "The Weary Blues". *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, First Vintage Classics Edition, Estate of Langston Hughes, 1994, p. 50

⁴⁰ Tracy, Steven C. "To the Tune of Those Weary Blues: The Influence of the Blues Tradition in Langston Hughes's Blues Poems." *MELUS*, vol. 8, no. 3, Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 75. *Jstor*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/467538>

An artist's exposure to black folk culture does not automatically guarantee work of the calibre of Hughes's: a certain attitude towards the people and their creations is required to fine poetry. As early as 1925 in his "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes demonstrated an admiration for the ethnic distinctiveness of the 'low down' folks with their 'heritage of rhythm and warmth, incongruous humor that so often, as in the blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears'.⁴¹

According to Tracy, "The Weary Blues" is not just canonized, because it talks about blues music.

It is canonized, because of the intense respect that Hughes shows for blues music in it. Hughes has always had a lot of respect for how genuine African American people who lived out in the country were when he was a child and how heartfelt the blues music that they produced was.

Those feelings are clearly shown in "The Weary Blues". Hughes shares those feelings with countless other Harlem Renaissance writers who were trying to embrace African American culture in their writing throughout the first half of the twentieth century, so Hughes' poetry about blues probably serves as a good reflection on what people in the Harlem Renaissance thought about blues music. "The Weary Blues" is probably the poem about blues by Hughes that is selected for inclusion in general anthologies the most for a very simple reason. For people with very little understanding of blues music, it is one of the poems he wrote that is the most clearly about blues music and critics tend to not want to look deeply at the influence of blues on Hughes's poetry which leads to them picking one of Hughes's poems that most clearly references blues music to include in the American literary canon as opposed to all of Hughes' other poems about blues music. The general public might assume that critics studying the Harlem Renaissance will know about blues music. However, according to Tracy, most of them barely know anything about blues music. He states at the very beginning of "To the Tune of Those Weary Blues: The Influence of the Blues Tradition in Langston Hughes's Poems" that,

⁴¹ Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain: Essay on Poetic Theory." *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69395/the-negro-artist-and-the-racial-mountain>.

“In the case of the blues, however, critics often demonstrate an incomplete knowledge of the field, an inability or lack of desire to explore the blues influence, or they assume that the reader has an in-depth knowledge of the field already. What emerges from these studies is an incomplete understanding of Hughes’s knowledge of the blues and of its influence on his work.”⁴²

According to Tracy, literary critics either do not understand blues very well, do not care about blues, do not have much time to spend looking at blues, or think that the members of the general public have an in-depth understanding of blues. For those reasons, they avoid researching the influence of blues on Hughes poetry and therefore do not see the more subtle references to blues that Hughes makes in his other poems that are heavily influenced by blues like his poems that have the rhythm of a blues song but do not talk about blues music directly.

Langston Hughes’s poem “Harlem” is almost as anthologized as “The Weary Blues”. It appears in seven out of the fifteen anthologies studied for this project. It is one of Hughes’s shortest poems. Hughes managed to draw critics’ attention to “Harlem” by discussing the deferring of the dreams of African Americans in the poem. Hughes suggests that dreams that have to be left unfulfilled like those of African American people living in Harlem will eventually be completely destroyed overtime by asking if those dreams will fade away like a variety of natural objects do over time. For example, he asks “Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over- like a syrupy sweet?”⁴³. Meat starts to stink and the sugar in a sweet will start to solidify if those foods are left undisturbed for a certain amount of time. Hughes seems to suggest the dreams will slowly rot and wither away if people aren’t able to pay attention to them as well. Hughes seems

⁴² Tracy, Steven C. “To the Tune of Those Weary Blues: The Influence of the Blues Tradition in Langston Hughes’s Blues Poems.” *MELUS*, vol. 8, no. 3, Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 73. *Jstor*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/467538>

⁴³ Hughes, Langston. “Harlem”. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, First Vintage Classics Edition, Estate of Langston Hughes, 1994, p. 426.

to suggest by italicizing the last line of his poem “*Or does it explode?*”⁴⁴ that a dream that is deferred will probably be completely destroyed instead of just rotting away. This last possibility of how a dream may be destroyed stands out as the least natural way of destroying a dream suggested in the poem. The other possible ways that a dream will get destroyed which are suggested in the poem are just a result of it being left alone for too long. While it is possible for a small group of things like eggs to explode when left alone for too long, this line doesn’t seem like a direct comparison to the destruction of any of those objects. What sets an explosion apart from the other methods of destruction listed in “Harlem” is that an explosion is often directly caused by another person or object. The dreams of people in Harlem might not naturally wither away. It is entirely possible that they are purposefully destroyed by society.

Several anthologies chose to anthologize “Harlem”, because it discusses a problem which lots of African American artists dealt with in the beginning of the twentieth century and which Harlem Renaissance authors worked hard to and at least mostly failed to solve. Most African American artists couldn’t pursue their dreams, because white publishers and art collectors wouldn’t accept their art. Hughes points out that fact in a group interview he did in the 1960s with James Baldwin, Emile Capouya, Lorain Hansberry, Nat Hentoff, and Alfred Kazin called “The Negro in American Culture”. He stated, “Prejudice doesn’t keep a writer from writing: if you’re colored, you can write all you want to, but you just try and sell it, that’s all”.⁴⁵ According to Hughes, African American writers could write as much as they wanted, but they would not get published by any of the publishing houses that existed in the first half of the twentieth century

⁴⁴ Hughes, Langston. “Harlem”. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, First Vintage Classics Edition, Estate of Langston Hughes, 1994, p. 426.

⁴⁵ Baldwin, James, et al. “The Negro in American Culture.” *CrossCurrents*, vol. 11, no. 3, Cross Currents Corporation, 1961, p. 208.

which might mean that they never would achieve their dream of becoming a famous writer. They had to focus on making money instead of focusing on their dream job. Critics canonize this poem by Hughes, since it discusses a problem that many Harlem Renaissance artists faced on a daily basis.

Another very anthologized poem by Langston Hughes is a poem called “Harlem Sweeties”. “Harlem Sweeties” is a poem that talks about the beauty that the narrator sees in the women who live in a section of Harlem called Sugar Hill. The narrator tells the reader of the poem that even though the women who live in Sugar Hill have a variety of skin tones he thinks that they are all beautiful unlike some people in the general public who might think that women with lighter skin are more beautiful than women with dark skin. The narrator compares the color of women’s skin to all kinds of delicious food to try to convince readers of “Harlem Sweeties” to see women with lots of different skin tones as sexually attractive. Hughes shows the intention that lies behind his comparisons between women and sweets throughout the poem with the last four lines of his poem. He writes, “So if you want to know beauty’s

Rainbow-sweet thrill,

Stroll down luscious,

Delicious, *fine* Sugar Hill”⁴⁶. The narrator of the poem believes that women with many different skin tones are beautiful and that their individuality is part of what makes them beautiful. He describes all the woman on Sugar Hill with adjectives that he might use to describe candy like luscious and delicious which is often seen as problematic today.

⁴⁶ Hughes, Langston. “Harlem Sweeties”. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, First Vintage Classics Edition, Estate of Langston Hughes, 1994, p. 245.

“Harlem Sweeties” can be seen as objectifying women. It can be seen as offensive and dehumanizing to compare women to candy, but the comparison made in “Harlem Sweeties” is just that a comparison. Comparing women to food can be useful in this context. Men see different foods as delicious so it is possible that if different women are compared to those foods then they will see that women with all different skin tones can be sexually attractive instead of just fair skinned women. Even with that proposed purpose to the objectification in this poem, it can still be seen as insulting. “Harlem Sweeties” isn’t included in some anthologies by female editors which include several poems by Langston Hughes such as *The Penguin Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry* which is edited by Rita Dove, because of how objectifying it is.

Despite how insulting “Harlem Sweeties” may seem, it is possible for it to be reclaimed by women as a symbol of the self-respect which all women should have which would give it more value as a piece of literature. Glenda Dickerson wrote about “Harlem Sweeties” in “The Cult of True Womanhood: Toward a Womanist Attitude in African-American Theatre” in 1988. She says that she used “Harlem Sweeties” for the basis of a play called *Tar Babies* that celebrated the importance and beauty of African American women. She acknowledges that “Harlem Sweeties” is objectifying, but she says that she and other African-American women had been able to reclaim it as a celebration of their own worth. She states, “The poem is called, ‘Harlem Sweeties’. Sterling Brown, a grand old patriarch from the Harlem Renaissance, wrote it. I can just see him standing on the corner, nudging his cronies as the ‘Harlem Sweeties’ go by; but for me and the other participants, it became a celebration of ourselves, of our unstoppable voices, our rapid tongues”⁴⁷. Dickerson has every right to judge Hughes for writing such an

⁴⁷ Dickerson, Glenda. “The Cult of True Womanhood: Toward a Womanist Attitude in African-American Theatre.” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 2, The John Hopkins University Press, 1988, pp. 178-187. *Jstor*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3207655>.

objectifying poem about the issue of prejudice surrounding the color of African American women's skin. He was middle aged when he wrote "Harlem Sweeties" and the words that are used to describe the women in the poem such as "girlie" and "lassie" do make the women seem very young.⁴⁸ However, it seems more than likely considering how much Hughes stood for helping African American people both be respected and gain self-respect that he intended this poem to serve as a message about how people should respect African American women and see them as beautiful no matter what their skin tone is. Overtime, Dickerson and other African American women have been able to see the poem the way that Hughes intended it to be seen. They have been able to reclaim the poem as a way to celebrate themselves and their voice in society. If African American women can use this poem as a way to be proud of their appearance, then who are white women and men of every race to say that it has no value and should not receive the critical acclaim that it has. The preference of the general public including African American people for one skin tone over another among African American people was and still is a big social issue for the African American community.

"Harlem Sweeties" is one of the poems by Hughes that gets anthologized the most because it is one of the literary works produced by Harlem Renaissance writers that tried to address the issue of colorism which was prevalent even in Harlem at the time that the poem was written and tried to uplift black women who had all shades of skin. The issue of prejudice based on the color of someone's skin was also tackled famously by another Harlem Renaissance author Wallace Thurman in *The Blacker the Berry* in 1929. According to Daniel M. Scott III, Thurman talks about the importance of his message in his autobiography "Notes on A Stepchild". He

⁴⁸ Hughes, Langston. "Harlem Sweeties". *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, First Vintage Classics Edition, Estate of Langston Hughes, 1994, p. 245.

states, “His book was interesting to read only because he had lain bare conditions scarcely hinted at before, conditions to which Negroes choose to remain blind and about which white people choose to remain in ignorance”.⁴⁹ Thurman praises himself for writing about racial issues that were ignored by both white people and African Americans including the fact that African American people with lighter skin were treated better by society than African American people with dark skin. It is possible that he and Hughes are both canonized now for actively trying to reduce people’s prejudice against dark-skinned African American women.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, “The Weary Blues”, “Harlem”, and “Harlem Sweeties” are all frequently anthologized in American general anthologies of literature. They all seem to be deemed worthy of inclusion in American anthologies because they all discuss the goals that Harlem Renaissance writers tried to achieve through their writing. It seems that including these poems in anthologies was a good choice as they show the variety of issues that Harlem Renaissance writers fought back against. However, it seems like anthologies could include more of a wide variety of Harlem Renaissance writers who also wrote about these issues to see how writing styles used by Harlem Renaissance writers and their opinions on social issues differed.

The literary canon has improved greatly overtime diversity wise. Most anthologies published today contain several African American, female, Asian American, and Hispanic writers, including often Langston Hughes. Most critics who write about the literary canon want the literary canon to include a diverse group of authors to show how different the writing of people writing in one literary movement can be. However, the diversity within the literary canon

⁴⁹ Scott III, Daniel M. “Harlem Shadows: Re-Evaluating Wallace Thurman’s “The Blacker the Berry.” *MELUS*, vol. 29, no. 3/4, pedagogy, canon, context: toward a redefinition of ethnic american literary studies, Oxford University Press on behalf of Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethic Literature of the United States (MELUS), 2004, pp. 323-339. *Jstor*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4141858>.

could still be better. There are still several critics who think the canon should be limited to a small group of only the best authors. There are also still much more white male authors who are canonized today than authors from any other race or gender. In order to truly understand how diverse literature is, we desperately need to include writing that is different from writing included in the American literary canon in the past and was created by a more diverse group of authors in the American literary canon.

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