

Harlem Voices, Images

Compare a Harlem Renaissance poem and mural through their actual words and images.

12.T.PM.1.a "Compare and contrast the works of writers and artists who are part of a specific movement during a particular time period. (I)"

NAME _____

DATE _____

Belonging, Pressure and Possibility

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s brought Black writers and visual artists to prominence.

Hughes's complete "Epilogue" (1926), widely known as "I, Too," pairs here with Douglas's Song of the Towers (1934).

Compare dignity and pressure through their words and images. Neither work represents every Black experience.



Aaron Douglas, Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers (1934)

Oil on canvas. Schomburg Center, Art and Artifacts Division. From The New York Public Library.

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/24d577b0-c6f4-012f-13dd-58d385a7bc34>

NYPL identifies this item as public domain in the United States. Reproduction unchanged.

Read and mark

Study both works. Underline first-person statements and future-oriented language in the poem. Note two mural details and a possible interpretation below.

Epilogue (I, Too)

Langston Hughes, *The Weary Blues* (1926), p. 109. Complete: eighteen lines, five original stanzas. Worksheet line numbers added.

- 1 I, too, sing America.
- 2 I am the darker brother.
- 3 They send me to eat in the kitchen
- 4 When company comes,
- 5 But I laugh,
- 6 And eat well,
- 7 And grow strong.
- 8 Tomorrow,
- 9 I'll sit at the table
- 10 When company comes.
- 11 Nobody'll dare
- 12 Say to me,
- 13 "Eat in the kitchen,"
- 14 Then.
- 15 Besides,
- 16 They'll see how beautiful I am
- 17 And be ashamed,—
- 18 I, too, am America.

Observe before interpreting

Name two visible mural details, then interpret their relationship. Separate observation from inference.

Compare with evidence

Question 1

Compare exclusion and belonging in the poem using an early detail and its ending.

Question 2

Compare the central standing figure with one lower bent figure. Give visible details, then an interpretation.

Question 3

Compare human agency under pressure in both works. Explain a similarity and a difference using a detail from each.

Your turn

Write exactly five sentences comparing dignity amid exclusion or pressure: a claim, one detail from each work, a difference in method, and why it matters.

QUESTION 1

The speaker is sent to eat in the kitchen when company comes, but the final line asserts “I, too, am America.” The imagined future at the table turns exclusion into a confident claim to belonging.

QUESTION 2

The central silhouetted figure stands upright with a saxophone and a raised hand; lower figures bend or crouch among large mechanical forms. The contrast can suggest creative assertion alongside pressure or struggle. Accept other interpretations grounded in what is visible.

QUESTION 3

Both can be read as asserting dignity amid constraints. Hughes gives a speaker the words “Tomorrow” and “Nobody’ll dare,” projecting changed relations; Douglas uses the upright musician, lowered figures and enormous gear to place assertion and pressure together in one image. The poem unfolds through a voice and time shift; the mural organizes simultaneous visual contrasts.

YOUR TURN: SAMPLE

Hughes and Douglas place human dignity beside forces that restrict it. Hughes’s speaker moves from being sent to the kitchen to declaring, “I, too, am America.” Douglas sets an upright musician with a raised hand above bent figures and a huge gear. The poem’s first-person voice imagines a changed future, while the mural presents assertion and pressure together through spatial contrasts. That difference matters because readers follow a speaker’s challenge over time, whereas viewers weigh several competing forms at once.

TEACHER NOTES

Assess direct engagement with the complete poem and actual mural, not repetition of the short context. Require exactly five sentences with evidence from both works and an explanation of method. Accept defensible interpretations that separate visible details from symbolic meanings; do not require identification of tiny background objects or color alone, so grayscale printing remains usable. Hughes’s speaker is not interchangeable with every Black person or with the author’s biography. “Epilogue” is the title printed in the 1926 source; all eighteen lines and five stanzas are preserved, with worksheet line numbers added. Text: Langston Hughes, *The Weary Blues*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1926, p. 109, via <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/74745>. The mural is reproduced complete from the NYPL photographic source, including its outer border; no synthetic reconstruction or crop.