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WRITING ABOUT AN AUTHOR IN DEPTH

A poem is best read in the light of all the other poems ever written. We read A the better read B (we have to start somewhere; we may get very little out of A). We read B the better to read C, C the better to read D, D the better to go back and get something more out of A. Progress is not the aim, but circulation. The thing is to get among the poems where they hold each other apart in their places as the stars do.

—Robert Frost

If you have read several works by an author, whether tragedies by Shakespeare or detective stories about Sherlock Holmes by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, you know that authors return again and again to certain genres and themes (tragedy for Shakespeare, crime for Conan Doyle), yet each treatment is different. *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Romeo and Juliet* are all tragedies and share certain qualities that we think of as Shakespearean, yet each is highly distinctive.

When we read several works by an author, we find ourselves thinking about resemblances and differences. We enjoy seeing the author take up again a theme (nature, or love, or immortality, for example) or explore once more the possibilities of a literary form (the sonnet, blank verse, the short story). We may find that the author has handled things differently and that we are getting a sense of the writer's variety and development.

Sometimes we speak of the shape or the design of the author's career, meaning that the careful study of the writings has led us to an understanding of the narrative—with its beginning, middle, and end—that the writings tell across a period of time. Often, once we read one poem by an author and find it intriguing or compelling, we are enthusiastic about reading more: Are there other poems like this one? What kinds of

poems were written before or after this one? Our enjoyment and understanding of one poem impel us to enjoy and understand other poems and make us curious about the place that each one occupies in a larger structure, the shape or design of the author's career.

Frost's words, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, imply a good strategy to follow when you are assigned to write about an author in depth. Begin with a single work and then move outward from it, making connections to works that show interesting similarities to or differences from it. With Frost, for example, you might begin with "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and explore his use of woods in other poems. You will find that he sometimes sets them (as in this poem) against the village or city, and that he sometimes sets their darkness against the light of the stars. Each poem is a work in itself, but it is also part of a larger whole.

Usually, for an assignment of this kind, the focus will be on poems or short stories. Unless the course is a seminar devoted to a single author, or two authors, your instructor probably will not have room on the syllabus for two novels by the same writer. The most you are likely to get is a week or two on Robert Frost or Emily Dickinson or on the short stories of James Joyce or Eudora Welty. When you reach these points on the syllabus, you want to know both how to explicate a single text and how to present an in-depth analysis of several of them at once.

A CASE STUDY: WRITING ABOUT LANGSTON HUGHES

For a course on twentieth-century literature, a student, Mark Bradley, was assigned to write about a theme (which he had to define himself) in a selection of poems by Langston Hughes (1902–67).

Hughes is best known for his poetry, but he was also a short story writer, a dramatist, an essayist, and an editor. He was born in Joplin, Missouri; grew up in Lawrence, Kansas, and Cleveland, Ohio; and spent a year living in Mexico before entering Columbia University in 1921. He left Columbia the following year and traveled extensively in Europe, returning to the United States in the mid-1920s. During these years, Hughes pursued his academic studies at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania (graduating in 1929) and published his first two books of verse, *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927). He also took part

in the Harlem Renaissance, an important literary and cultural movement of the 1920s and 1930s that celebrated and supported the efforts of African-American writers and artists; in Hughes's words, it fostered "the expression of our individual dark-skinned selves." Hughes's many literary achievements, drawing upon spirituals, blues, jazz, and folk expression, and his rich, productive career have led his biographer, Arnold Rampersad, to describe him as "perhaps the most representative black American writer."

Mark started by closely studying a poem by Hughes that had caught his attention when he made his way through a group of poems for the first time. Here is the poem, and then the journal entry that he wrote:

THE SOUTH

The lazy, laughing South
With blood on its mouth.
The sunny-faced South,
    Beast-strong,
    Idiot-brained.
The child-minded South
Scratching in the dead fire's ashes
For a Negro's bones.
    Cotton and the moon,
    Warmth, earth warmth,
    The sky, the sun, the stars,
    The magnolia scented South.
Beautiful, like a woman,
Seductive as a dark-eyed whore,
    Passionate, cruel,
    Honey-lipped, syphilitic—
    That is the South.
And I, who am black, would love her
But she spits in my face.
And I, who am black,
Would give her many rare gifts
But she turns her back upon me.
    So now I seek the North—
    The cold-faced North,
    For she, they say,
    Is a kinder mistress,

And in her house my children
May escape the spell of the South.

[1922]

The poem "The South" surprised me. It wasn't what I expected. I thought Hughes would attack the South for being so racist—he wrote the poem in the 1920s, when segregation was everywhere in the South. He says some harsh things about the South: "Beast strong / Idiot-brained." But he also says that the South is attractive in some ways, and I'm not convinced that when he brings in the North at the end, he really believes that the North is superior.

His curiosity kindled by this poem, Mark made it his point of departure for the thematic paper he was assigned. He judged that if he worked intensively on this poem and came to know it well, he could review other Hughes poems and see how they were both like and unlike the one with which he had begun.

In reading an author's poems or stories in depth, and in preparing to write about an important issue, feature of style, or theme in them, you will find the following questions useful:

- What subject matter recurs in the author's work?
- Do certain views—attitudes toward life—emerge?
- Does a particular personality take shape?
- Does the author show a fondness for certain literary devices, such as irony, symbolism, metaphor?
- Do any of the poems or stories strike you as highly *un*representative of the author?
- Take note of the dates of publication: Do you detect changing views or changing techniques?
- Does one work seem the key to the others? Does one work strike you as very closely related in some way to another?
- How do your perceptions change when you place two authors—say, Hughes and Frost, or Joyce and Welty—alongside one another for intensive study? What do they illuminate about one another's central themes and literary style? Does one show greater range in style and subject than the other?

When you write about an author's work in depth, remember to keep in mind the length of the assignment and the choice of examples. You want to treat the right number of examples for the space you are given and, furthermore, to provide sufficient detail in your analysis of each of them.

Preparing an outline can be valuable. It will lead you to think carefully about the examples that you have selected for your argument and the main idea about each one that you will present. Like Mark Bradley, whose paper we will turn to in a moment, you might begin by examining one poem in depth and then proceed to relate it to key passages in other poems. Or maybe you will find one passage in a poem so significant that it—rather than the poem in its entirety—can serve as a good beginning. Whichever strategy you choose, when you review your rough draft use a pen or pencil to mark off the amount of space that you have devoted to each example.

Ask yourself:

- Is this example clearly connected to my argument in the paper as a whole?
- Have I not only referred to the example but also provided adequate quotation from it?
- Have I made certain to *comment* on the passage? Passages do not interpret themselves. You have to explicate and explain them.
- Has each example received its due? There is no easy rule of thumb for knowing how much space each example should be given. Some passages are more complicated than others; some demand more intensive scrutiny. But you will be well on the way toward handling this aspect of the paper effectively if you are self-aware about your choices.

From the poem "The South" and his journal entry, Mark Bradley went on to explore two other poems by Hughes. Here are the poems, followed by Mark's essay.

RUBY BROWN

She was young and beautiful
And golden like the sunshine
That warmed her body.
And because she was colored
Mayville had no place to offer her,
Nor fuel for the clean flame of joy
That tried to burn within her soul.

One day,
Sitting on old Mrs. Latham's back porch
Polishing the silver,
She asked herself two questions
And they ran something like this:
What can a colored girl do
On the money from a white woman's kitchen?
And ain't there any joy in this town?

Now the streets down by the river
Know more about this pretty Ruby Brown,
And the sinister shuttered houses of the bottoms
Hold a yellow girl
Seeking an answer to her questions.
The good church folk do not mention
Her name any more.

But the white men
Habitués of the high shuttered houses,
Pay more money to her now
Than they ever did before,
When she worked in their kitchens.

[1926]

Ballad of the Landlord

Landlord, landlord,
My roof has sprung a leak.
Don't you 'member I told you about it
Way last week?

Landlord, landlord,
These steps is broken down.
When you come up yourself
It's a wonder you don't fall down.

Ten Bucks you say I owe you?
Ten Bucks you say is due?
Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you
Till you fix this house up new.

What? You gonna get eviction orders?
You gonna cut off my heat?
You gonna take my furniture and
Throw it in the street?

Um-huh! You talking high and mighty.
Talk on—till you get through.
You ain't gonna be able to say a word
If I land my fist on you.

Police! Police!
Come and get this man!
He's trying to ruin the government
And overturn the land!

Copper's whistle!
Patrol bell!
Arrest.

Precinct Station.
Iron cell.
Headlines in press:

MAN THREATENS LANDLORD

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TENANT HELD NO BAIL

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JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL.

[1942]

Mark Bradley

English 1C: Critical Interpretation

25 March 2001

A National Problem: Race and Racism

in the Poetry of Langston Hughes

One of Langston Hughes's concerns in his poetry is to show that racism is a national problem, and that it is a mistake to pretend

that it affects only the South. In his poem "The South," Hughes criticizes the racist attitudes that pervade the southern states, yet he ends with only a hesitant embrace of the North. In other poems, such as "Ruby Brown" and "Ballad of the Landlord," it is not racism in the South that is the crucial fact; it is instead the presence of racism everywhere in the United States.

"The South" begins with a line that sounds appealing: "The lazy, laughing South." But then Hughes turns sharply to a different kind of image in the second line: "With blood on its mouth." Line 3 echoes line 1: "The sunny-faced South"; and then the next two lines challenge it: "Beast strong / Idiot-brained." Hughes continues:

> The child-minded South
> Scratching in the dead fire's ashes
> For a Negro's bones.

Here Hughes is attacking the evil of lynching, by which black men were hung, shot or burned to death on the mere suspicion of having committed a crime or somehow threatened white supremacy. According to one source that I consulted, from 1882 to 1901 the annual number of lynchings "usually exceeded 100," and though the numbers declined somewhat in the twentieth century, there were still eighty three lynchings in 1919, just several years before Hughes published his poem (Foner and Garraty 685).

Hughes is moved by the beauties of the southern landscape, but he knows that the South is cruel and contemptuous, and that it will not return to him the love he feels for it:

> And I, who am black, would love her
> But she spits in my face.

Hughes then says that he will "seek the North," but his words are very qualified and cautious:

> So now I seek the North—
> The cold-faced North,
> For she they say,
> Is a kinder mistress,
> And in her house my children
> May escape the spell of the South.

"Cold-faced" not only refers to the cold northern weather but also implies something "cold" about northern interactions with other people. The South, Hughes says at one point, is dangerously "seductive" (line 14), but the North may be at the other extreme—distant, chilly in its response to newcomers. Hughes does not know for certain how he will be treated in the North. He has heard reports—"they say"; but possibly the reports will prove inaccurate. "May escape" the spell of the South, he writes, which is more tentative than saying will escape. Most important of all, he doesn't expect his own life will be better, though maybe his children's will.

It is possible that "Ruby Brown" is a southern poem, a story about life in the South, but it is interesting that Hughes doesn't say explicitly that it is. This is the story of a "young and beautiful" woman who wants the good things of life but who will never be able to afford them on the wages she receives as a servant. Hughes shows her turning to a grim life as a prostitute.

Hughes intends for readers to understand Ruby Brown's story as one that has occurred countless times. It is a story about racism—how racism drives people to despair and corruption.

"Mayville" sounded to me at first like the name of a southern town, but according to an atlas that I consulted, all of the towns named Mayville in the United States are in the North (Michigan, New York, North Dakota, Wisconsin). For Hughes, racism is a problem for the United States as a whole, because its effects are evident throughout the nation.

"Ballad of the Landlord" is also about despair, but it is about anger and resistance, too, and, like "Ruby Brown," it recounts an incident that could happen anywhere. The speaker of the first twenty lines is indignant at the shabby condition of the building he lives in; he talks back to the landlord and threatens him with violence: "If I land my fist on you." But Hughes's real point in this poem is that an African-American who stands up for his rights is immediately perceived as a danger to the community. Everybody calls for the police and declares that this black man is a revolutionary who aims to overthrow the government and hurl the country into chaos. The final lines, in capital letters, indicate how the media broadcast a version of events that confirms racist stereotypes. It is true that the man does threaten the landlord, but that is only because he himself has been mistreated.

Someone could claim that Hughes located "Ballad of the Landlord" in the North, just as it could be argued that "Ruby Brown" is a poem about a woman in a southern locale. But again, if Hughes had wanted to make this clear to his readers, he could have done so. He chooses not to, because he is aiming to make readers aware of the national evil of racism.

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Works Cited

Foner, Eric, and John A. Garraty, eds. The Reader's Companion to American History. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991.

Hughes, Langston. Collected Poems. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Knopf, 1994.

The New Cosmopolitan World Atlas. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1992.

A Brief Overview of the Essay

- Focus on the title and the opening and closing paragraphs. Are they effective?
- Elsewhere in this book (pages 53–54), there is an explication of Hughes's poem "Harlem." How might this poem be integrated into the analysis that the student gives?
- The student did not comment on the dates of publication of the poems. Was this a mistake?
- The student used two reference works. Do you think that these make his analysis more convincing? Explain.

To develop your ability to study and write about an author in depth, you might enjoy reading more short stories by James Joyce and Eudora Welty, two of the authors featured in this book. Joyce's "Araby" (338–342) is included in *Dubliners* (1914), and Welty's "A Worn Path" (342–348) is the last story in *A Curtain of Green* (1941).

What is the relationship of each Joyce or Welty story to the others in the collection? What comparisons, contrasts, and connections among the stories, and between the authors, come to mind as you read the two books? How does each author present character, handle dialogue, describe setting, structure plot, explore and develop themes?

For studying an author or authors in depth, make good use of the strategy of preliminary note taking illustrated in the section of this book on "A Worn Path" (pages 342–348). For studying an author in depth in a research paper, consult the discussion of research strategies and print and Internet resources in Chapter 15.