

Langston Hughes's "Freedom"

Context

"Freedom" was first published in 1949. It was a time when Black Americans were still subjected to extreme racism, disenfranchisement, and segregation in many aspects of their lives. Hughes claims in the poem that neither compromise nor fear will get him closer to democracy. As a result, Hughes is underlining the socioeconomic unfairness that existed in America at the time, where democracy was only for white people and the higher classes.

The poem is written in free verse with no consistent metrical pattern. There are rhymed lines in the poem, although there is no consistent rhyme scheme. The poem is split into three stanzas.

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Freedom will not come

Today, this year,

Nor ever

Through compromise and fear.

I have as much right

As the other fellow has

To stand

On my two feet

And own the land.

I tire so of hearing people say,

Let things take their course.

Tomorrow is another day.

I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.

I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.

Freedom

Is a strong seed

Planted

In a great need.

I live here, too.

I want my freedom

Just as you.

Enjambment, from the French meaning "a striding over," is a poetic term for the continuation of a sentence or phrase from one line of poetry to the next. Look at the first and second line of the first stanza. What is the effect of the enjambment?

Conversely, caesura is a break in the meter of a line, usually indicated by a comma or a slash; in the second line, caesura breaks the line. What is the effect of this?

What effect does the declarative first statement have?

How is the tone impacted by this?

What is the effect of the use of asyndeton? What about the structural choice to have "Nor ever" on a new and indented line?

What is the speaker telling audiences in the first stanza?

This is the first use of first person, where the speaker is shown to be an individual addressing us.

Again, consider the structural significance of having this line here? What might the impact of this be? Indentation can inform a longer pause. If this is the case, does this longer pause evoke anything?

This stanza also has a lot of enjambment; consider the theme of this poem and whether such structural choices are in harmony with the ideas in the poem.

What might this imagery evoke? Could it be read as a metaphor for anything?

The five lines opening this stanza follow an ABACC rhyme scheme and is probably the most traditional section of the poem in regards to classical structures.

None of these lines, unlike in the earlier stanzas, are enjambed either. Is there any significance to this?

The speaker reports things they hear people say about freedom and democracy; in relation to the historical context, what relevance do these lines have?

What is implied in this metaphor? How is the tone impacted by this?

The ending of the poem is all indented. Why do you think this is?

What is inferred via this metaphor? Is there any effect that the enjambment has?

How do the final lines impact the overall tone of the poem and its themes? What language choices are able to do this?