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Sandbox Essay

Sandbox Essay: Theme in English B/African American Criticism

In “*Theme for English B*” Langston Hughes embodies Amiri Baraka’s quote about black writers having an obligation to help the race through literature to depict racism and to provide positive images of African Americans. The poem depicts a relationship of a black male student attending a predominantly white college, with a white professor. The poem uses African American criticism to depict the ways in which the two characters contrast, and how that affects the worlds of both. The main character is African American and is navigating resources that are different from the resources or lack of, that he’s had in his culture. “*Theme for English B*” depicts positivity in the sense that through trials and tribulations of the main character’s life, he is still pursuing an education, and is being helped.

Though the differences between the main character and his professor are depicted it could be inferred that the professor sees himself in the main character and that is why he’s taken it upon himself to help him. It could also be that the professor is just teaching, not thinking about the differences and assuming that each student has access to the same opportunities. The poem opens with, “Go home and write a page tonight. And let that page come out of you. Then, it will be true.” The opening line is what the main character is questioning. He’s questioning if it is that easy to do, without thinking about what might interfere with that, or the types of pressures that come with that. The focus is centered around cultural differences and aspects that one may not understand over the other.

The focus on differences in the poem is interesting when the main character discusses where he's from. The line, "but I guess I'm what I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you," suggests that he's talking about where he's from and how it has influenced him, and that at twenty-two those experiences are different for both him and his professor when his professor was his age. The poem conveys cultural differences, and represents an African American experience in literature, painting a disconnect but also looking at similarities.