

Marxist Criticism

In "Theme for English B" by Langston Hughes, the narrator quickly identifies himself as a young, black man in the process of attempting to get a higher education in New York City. The narrator uses an assignment opportunity to expose his struggles as a young, black man living in a world that is dominated by white culture. The similarities and differences of white and black students are highlighted not just because of their skin color, but the innate differences in struggle because of starting points. In focusing on a singular black student in a university full of white students, Hughes obviously hints that white people simply had a set advantage for their education experience. However, a deeper reading reveals that it isn't just about skin color; rather, knowledge is a commodity and african americans struggle further economically because of their skin color.

In attempting to highlight the similarities of the narrator and his white peers, Hughes temporarily eliminates the race aspect of the poem and hones in on the idea that in reality, these students are very similar. They have gone through similar life experiences and want similar things. Hence their joint longing for a higher education. The narrator emphasizes that, just like his peers, he likes to "eat, drink, sleep, and be in love." With such basic human wants, it is easy for Hughes to convey the idea that

although the skin is different, these students are the one in the same in the classroom. However, the narrator knows that “being [him],” the page that he writes “will not be white.” Although all of these students may have these innate similarities, there is no denying the fact that the race of the narrator has caused him not only a social, but a vast economic disadvantage. While he may feel like an outcast in his classroom, he is separated even further from his peers due to his living situation. In being denied a room on campus to stay in, the narrator must go down “the hill” into Harlem, “through a park, then cross St. Nicholas, Eighth Avenue, Seventh...” and so on, just so that he can finally arrive in his own room and sit to write his assignment. Hughes here highlights the idea that education is a commodity and the easy accessibility of knowledge is a right held for white people at this time. The narrator makes a subtle affront to his white classmates when he tells them directly, “Sometimes perhaps you don’t want to be a part of me. Nor do I often want to be a part of you.” Following this, he states that they may learn from each other, but his white counterparts will always be “white-- and somewhat more free.” At this point, it is normal for a white person to receive a higher education and room on campus while doing so. While a black man, who completes the same assignments for the same classes, will have his work devalued as he it is still an abnormality to be attending a university. Essentially, Hughes is acknowledging the similarities of the classmates, yet reminding readers that the narrator’s white classmates will always have an economic advantage to the accessibility of knowledge simply from being white.

