

Theme for English B- Langston Hughes

In the 1896 ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the United States Supreme Court upheld the decision that racial segregation was constitutional under the premise of “separate but equal.” This decision was not overturned until 1954 in the court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ruled segregation of public education was unconstitutional. This took place during the Civil Rights Movement in hopes to accomplish the goals of ending legalized racial segregation, disenfranchisement, and discrimination in the United States. Langston Hughes published the poem, *Theme for English B*, in 1951. African American critical theory can be used to address eurocentrism and the systematic perpetuation of disadvantages for people of color.

Eurocentrism is belief that the European culture is vastly superior to all others (Tyson 345). Through this belief, it is socially expected that unless specifically expressed, literature defaults to the eurocentric “norm” or to white cultural hegemony. In *Theme for English B*, the professor who assigns the writing topic is white and the rest of the speaker’s classmates are white. The speaker specifies this in the lines, “I am the only colored student in my class” and “a part of you, instructor. You are white.” When the instructor gives the assignment, he assumes the eurocentric norm, and does not consider the life of his one colored student. In the assignment, the instructor says, “*And let that page come out of you—Then, it will be true.*” In response, the speaker writes, “It’s not easy to know what is true for you or me at twenty-two, my age.” With this line the speaker invokes the idea that each person’s truth is different, and not universal. The papers turned in by the speaker and the other students will be different, because they live different lives. While the white students head home to their dorm rooms, the speaker must trek

home because he is segregated from the dorms due to his race. The speaker describes his journey,

“The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem,
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator
up to my room.”

The speaker then questions if where he lives is a part of who he is. He states, “But I guess I’m what I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you.”

The speaker experiences systematic disadvantages due to the color of his skin. The first disadvantage is the fact that he is segregated from his educational peers. He must take a long route to go home. Second, he lives in Harlem which is often defined by the low economic status; which is a result of racial discrimination. Lastly, in a society that perpetuates racism, the speaker is regarded as inferior because of his skin color. The speaker attempts to share his experience through writing and tells the instructor,

“I guess you learn from me—
although you’re older—and white—
and somewhat more free”

This is the systematic racial discrimination because a white citizen is regarded as more free.

Unfortunately, racism is not a new concept. It dates back to the settler-colonialist era. Racism is alive and well today in American society. It can be seen in many forms, whether it is treatment by police, mass incarceration, or susceptibility to poverty. The color of one’s skin can be a determining factor of a range of variables in one’s life. African American criticism helps reveal the systematic discrimination and racism.