

Daniel Morris

Professor of English

Purdue University

dmorris@purdue.edu

“Go Home And Write A Page Tonight: Subversive Irony and Resistant Reading in “Theme For English B”

“Theme For English B” (1951) is Langston Hughes’s witty free verse representation of a young Black student’s response to a white college teacher’s rather thoughtless assignment prompt to “go home and write a page tonight.” In my reading of this poem, I show how Hughes uses irony and subversive humor to challenge the teacher’s assumptions about what it means for a young, diasporic Black man living at the Harlem “Y” to have the kind of unproblematic sense of “self,” “home,” and “truth” implied by the teacher’s assignment. By noting the contingent nature of the speaker’s identity – where he lives, where he is from, his age, the color of his skin, the kinds of music he likes -- Hughes challenges the association of a universal speaker with the lyric “I” that inevitably represents a limited subset of potential speakers whose experiences are inflected by their subject position. A canonical white European poet such as Keats is unselfconscious about applying the lyric “I” to an identity he presumes to be universal in “When I have fears.” Hughes, by contrast to Keats, uses irony, humor, and resistant reading strategies to deconstruct universal notions of lyric subjectivity. At the same time, he

challenges his teacher's assumptions about what it means for the older white male instructor and the younger Black student to share space as fellow American citizens. Hughes does so by foregrounding the complex nature of the speaker's negotiation to his primary reader, in this case the wealthier, older, and better established white male teacher. Transforming his response to the teacher's bland assignment – which Hughes ironically recasts in the form of an outdated rhymed quatrain – into a free verse poem, Hughes illustrates how wit, risk-taking, and a sense of creative play can be put in the service of a critical reading of the American social text. Hughes's speaker acknowledges shared values – the speaker says that he, like most Americans, enjoys eating, sleeping, and being in love -- but he leaves room for an expression of the crucial markers of differences that makes “going home” to “write a page tonight” and making that page “come out of you” such a vexing proposition for the talented but quasi-homeless speaker. By transforming his response to the teacher's assignment into a modernist poem, and by challenging the basic assumptions behind the teacher's assignment (for example, that each students has a home to "go home" to), Hughes's student speaker ironically subverts the standard pedagogical hierarchy by becoming the instructor to the teacher. Especially since the speaker is a young, Black, quasi-homeless student, this inversion of teacher-student relations is certainly a major ironical element of Hughes's great poem.