Let America Be America Again

SUMMARY

The speaker opens the poem with a seemingly patriotic proclamation to let America be the country it once was, to once again embody the principles it champions. The speaker expresses nostalgia for a previous version of America that championed freedom and opportunity.

(The speaker immediately challenges this sentiment, however, suggesting that this image of the United States was never actually the reality for the speaker.)

The speaker invokes the concept of the American Dream, asking the country to once again represent freedom and opportunity for all—to once again be a place filled with strength and compassion, unsusceptible to the power imbalances and inequities created by the kind of scheming kings and tyrants who've stomped all over lower classes throughout history.

(This version of America, however, never was the reality for the speaker.)

The speaker asks for America to again be the kind of place that champions freedom above all else, where everyone has the same, legitimate opportunities, and life is defined by an unshakeable belief in equality.

(The speaker has never actually *experienced* any of that equality, however, and implies that the American Dream is nothing more than an empty lie promoted under the false pretense of patriotism.)

The speaker calls out to those who have been failed by the false promise of the American Dream.

The speaker identifies with the experiences of oppressed groups throughout American history: poor white people, African Americans haunted by the history of slavery, Native Americans pushed away from their own land by settlers, immigrants in search of a better future— yet who quickly realize that America is just like everywhere else, with the rich and powerful stomping all over the poor and marginalized.

The speaker identifies with a hopeful young person whose dreams will never actually be realized because he U.S. is operating on the same principles of greed and domination that have been the fabric of society since ancient civilization—principles that prioritize profits above all else, that encourage the hoarding of land and gold and the exploitation of workers.

The speaker identifies with the experiences of those whose lives are characterized by an absolute lack of freedom: the farmer is bound to the soil, the worker to the machine, the African American to servitude. The speaker then identifies with the masses of regular people, pushed to the brink of cruelty by their hunger—something the American Dream has done nothing to diminish. The speaker then pushes back against the idea that a strong work ethic will lead to economic and personal success, referring to working-class men who work hard their entire lives yet never escape poverty.

The speaker escalates this critique by pointing out that the most oppressed groups in America today were originally the most committed to the vision of the American Dream. European immigrants, who traveled to America from the "Old World" to seek out new opportunities and avoid persecution in their homelands, laid the cultural foundation for what would become the American Dream. The speaker contends that these immigrants, along with African slaves who were transported overseas against their will, were the ones who actually built the "homeland of the free" from the ground up.

The speaker stops to consider who is actually included in the "homeland of the free."

The speaker certainly isn't free, nor are the millions of underpaid workers going on strike and challenging the exploitation that they've been subjected to for generations (the speaker is directly referencing the labor movement that was gaining traction in the 1930s). The speaker argues that working-class Americans have nothing to show for their hard work and dedication—for all their patriotic songs and flag waving—except for an increasingly tenuous belief in the American Dream.

The speaker sets up the conclusion of the poem with a call to action for America to be itself again. While the speaker is adamant that the United States has failed to live up to its promise thus far, the speaker is confident that the realization of the American Dream is not only possible, but necessary. The speaker calls upon oppressed communities—the poor, Native Americans, African Americans; those whose blood, sweat, and tears build this country—to rise up and reinvent America according to its powerful founding ideals of equality and freedom for all.

People can hurl whatever insults they want to at the speaker, but these are useless against the strength of genuine freedom and equality. The marginalized must reassert their right to the American Dream and take back power from upper-class individuals who profit off of other people's labor without ever working themselves.

The speaker reiterates the fact that America never lived up to its promises of freedom, equality, and opportunity for people like the speaker. All the same, the speaker vows to create the America that *should* exist.

The speaker believes that the American Dream can be actualized once and for all, but only through the efforts of those

who formed the backbone of the United States since its inception. The people must rise up from their horrific mistreatment and reclaim what's theirs—every bit of America, from sea to sea and everything in between. Only then can America truly embody the ideals on which it was founded.

THEMES

THE FAILURE OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

"Let America Be America Again" highlights the discrepancy between the ideals of the American Dream and the harsh realities of American life. The speaker argues that the United States has not yet fulfilled its promised vision of freedom and equality for all people.

Hughes wrote the poem during the Great Depression. The economic devastation of this event created a crisis of American cultural identity, white had been built on the promise of upward mobility (essentially, the ability to rise up out of the lower and middle classes) and greater opportunity for people from all walks of life. The speaker echoes this cultural crisis in the opening lines by declaring, "Let America be America again. / Let it be the dream it used to be." In other words, the speaker implies that America has lost its way and implores the country to return to its former glory.

It becomes clear, however, that the speaker does not actually agree with this nostalgic vision of American society. In fact, the speaker rebukes the belief that America was *ever* the "America" it has long been portrayed as, insisting instead that the American Dream was *never* achieved in the past. The speaker further invokes the founding ideals of freedom and equality, suggesting that American society has failed to meet the very standard on which it was built. The speaker makes this disdain for hollow talk of freedom and quality clear through a sarcastic reference to patriotic language, stating, "There's never been equality for me / Nor freedom in this 'homeland of the free.'"

The speaker then describes several counterexamples to the American Dream, notably the experiences of black Americans, the working poor, Native Americans, and immigrants. The speaker argues that all of these marginalized groups have experienced "the same old stupid plan / Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak." Thus, the speaker implies that American society is not special; rather, it has perpetuated the *same* systems of oppression and exploitation as the nations that came before it. By exploring the experiences of oppressed groups, the speaker demonstrates how the idealistic image of America erases communities that have been disadvantaged since the United States was established.

The speaker then ties this discussion directly into the political climate of the Great Depression and when the labor movement was gaining momentum. He references the workers on strike "who have nothing for our pay" except for the "dream that is almost dead today." The speaker's qualification that the dream is *almost* dead implies that there is still hope of American society living up to its promise in the future.

It is clear, however, that the American Dream will not survive if exploitative labor and greed continue to prevail. When the speaker is describing groups who have been failed by the American Dream, there is mention of "the man who never got ahead / The poorest worker bartered through the years." This image of the worker who never progresses up the socioeconomic ladder demonstrates how exploitation directly contradicts the promise of the American Dream: that is, that anyone who is willing to work hard can get ahead and create a better life for themselves. Instead, the poor are likely to remain poor, treated as disposable currency that can be "bartered" or exchanged indefinitely between various employers. The speaker contends that this system, which treats workers as commodities rather than human beings, has been pivotal in preventing the realization of the American Dream.

The speaker concludes with a call to action, proclaiming "From those who live like leeches on the people's lives / We must take back our land again, America!" The speaker thus encourages the oppressed groups to rise up and reinvent America in the vision of freedom and equality for all. The speaker ends the poem with a new promise that "America will be!" and notes that it is not too late for America to achieve its founding ideals. By ending this otherwise critical commentary in an optimistic way, the speaker ultimately embraces the potential of the American Dream and reinforces its powerful role in American culture.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 3-4
- Line 5
- Lines 6-7
- Lines 8-9
- Line 10
- Lines 11-14
- Lines 15-16
- Lines 19-33
- Lines 34-51
- Lines 52-61
- Lines 62-64
- Lines 64-72
- Lines 73-79
- Lines 82-86

OPPRESSION IN THE UNITED STATES

In "Let America Be America Again," Hughes analyzes the complex relationship between oppression and the American Dream. After conveying the traditional narrative

of the American Dream in the opening stanzas—as the promise of opportunity and freedom for all—the speaker presents a counter-narrative through the eyes of marginalized groups in American history.

This shift is signaled in the italicized rhyming couplet ("*Say, who are you* ..."), which indicates the introduction of a new perspective into the poem. The mumbling figure in the dark, who represents all of the people who have been forgotten in the idealistic conception of the American Dream, now has an opportunity to speak their truth and reinvent the cultural narrative. By grounding the poem in the perspective of marginalized groups, the speaker can fully explore a historical injustice: the fact that the groups who have formed the foundation of America have had limited access to the economic prosperity and success promised by the American Dream.

In addition to pointing out this historical injustice, the speaker traces a common trend that unites all of these groups: an utter lack of freedom over their own lives. The farmer is described as a "bondsman" to the soil, invoking an antiquated definition of the term that renders it synonymous to "slave." The worker is "sold to the machine" in the same manner that the slave is sold to the slave master. The speaker completes this comparison by finally mentioning "the Negro, servant to you all" and implying that black Americans represent the greatest absence of freedom given their historical status as slaves in the United States.

The speaker goes on to describe the oppressed as "the one who dreamt our basic dream," suggesting that the American Dream has failed the people who not only believed in it the most, but who made its inception possible. Thus oppression in the United States takes on a new disturbing dimension; not only is oppression incompatible with the ideals of the American Dream, but it disproportionately impacts the same groups that were inspired by that very "dream" to create America in the first place.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 5
- Lines 7-9
- Line 10
- Lines 15-16
- Lines 17-18
- Lines 19-38
- Lines 39-44
- Lines 45-50
- Lines 52-55
- Lines 62-64
- Lines 65-70
- Lines 80-82
- Line 86

GREED, CLASS, AND LABOR

The speaker directly connects the failure of the American Dream to live up to its potential to the American obsession with profit and greed. This is fitting given that, as previously noted in this guide, Hughes wrote the poem during the Great Depression, at a time when labor movements sought more rights and protections for American workers. The speaker of the poem presents these workers as toiling away on behalf of an upper class that exploits the labor of the masses for their own personal gain. This practice is antithetical to American ideals of freedom and opportunity, the poem argues, because it has essentially made workers slaves to their labor.

This is what the speaker means when identifying as "the farmer, bondsman to the soil" and "the worker sold to the machine." The speaker is saying that workers cannot be free because they have no *choice* but to work tirelessly in a society that privileges profit above all else. They must work simply to survive, and have no meaningful chance to actually rise up in society.

This is reiterated with the speaker mentions the "Old World" with its "serfs." Serfs were essentially slaves forced to work the land for a lord in feudal Europe. The speaker makes this reference to draw a parallel between the oppression of serfs and the living conditions of working-class Americans, despite the fact that the latter are supposedly part of a more progressive "New World."

The speaker later alludes to the 1930s labor movements directly with the lines about "The millions on relief today? / The millions shot down when we strike? / The millions who have nothing for our pay?" This is a reference to the Great Depression, which lefts millions out of work. The relief programs mentioned were part of the New Deal in the 1930s, which provided temporary work programs to reduce rampant unemployment. How, the speaker asks here, can America call itself a land of equal opportunity if millions of patriotic, flag-waving Americans have lost their livelihoods?

The speaker also repeatedly criticizes the selfishness and greed of the upper class—and points out how this is totally incompatible with the ideals behind the American Dream. The United States was founded as a place "Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme / That any man be crushed by one above." In other words, America is *supposed* to be a country free from dictators or monarchs whose main concern is preserving their own power at the expense of the masses over which they rule.

Later, the speaker is even more direct in his criticism. The speaker deems the ruling class "those who live like leeches on the people's lives," comparing them to parasites who feed off other people's labor without contributing anything of their own. They "take the pay" of hardworking Americans—Americans, the speaker insists, who have as much a right to the promise of America as anyone else.

People believe America is a place of "hope," the speaker says, yet when they arrive they find that the same old systems of oppression—of "dog eat dog," rich vs. poor—are playing out. The "young man" who wants to establish himself in America is thus instead subject to "that ancient endless chain / Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land! / Of grab the gold! ... Of owning everything for one's own greed!" In other words, America has simply recreated an endless, age-old cycle in which the lower classes are exploited by the greediness of those above them. American society is driven by "greed" and "profit"—not liberty and justice for all.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 5
- Lines 7-9
- Line 10
- Lines 13-40
- Lines 45-70
- Lines 73-74
- Lines 80-86

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Let America be ...
... America to me.)

The opening stanza starts with a proclamation, invoking a sense of nostalgia for a better version of America that has (supposedly) come and gone. The speaker seems to want America to once again be the kind of place defined by a sense of freedom and opportunity for all, for the country to once again embody the "American Dream" itself.

The first set of lines establishes the speaker's frequent use of anaphora. The repetition of "Let" and "Let it be the" make the poem feel like an invocation of sorts. This is also likely an allusion to the lyric "let freedom ring" from the song "America (My Country, 'Tis of Thee)," which served as a de facto national anthem until the 1930s. The speaker, then, is using language deeply connected to America and its founding ideals. Indeed, the word "America" itself is used four times within the first five lines.

Additionally, the speaker references the concept of the American Dream directly in the second line. This reference effectively positions the speaker's discussion in relation to this cultural concept and its social, political, and historical implications. The speaker goes on to personify America itself as the "pioneer" seeking freedom in a new land. The figure of the pioneer is emblematic of the American Dream and its promise of newfound freedom and opportunity. By drawing from the American cultural imagination, the speaker initially seems to endorse conventional attitudes about American society.

This perspective, however, is immediately contradicted by the stand-alone line that follows the first stanza:

(America never was America to me.)

The speaker suggests that the American Dream never reached fruition in their own life, indicating that the speaker's perspective is more complex than it appeared to be at first glance. The fact that this phrase is contained within parenthesis and separated from the opening stanza suggests that it is something the broader narrative of America has ignored; the speaker's experience is an inconvenient reality that undermines the idea that America was ever the kind of place it has purported to be.

In terms of form, the opening stanza is a quatrain and with ABAB rhyme scheme. There's the slant rhyme of "again"/"plain" and the full rhyme of "be"/"free." This is a pretty easy, standard pattern for a poem, suggesting a sense of complacency—which is then abruptly broken by the standalone line 5. However, this standalone line also rhymes with the B sound from the quatrain—that is, "me" rhymes with "be" and "free"—suggesting that, though the speaker has been excluded from the American dream, the speaker, too, is still a part of America.

LINES 6-10

Let America be ...
... America to me.)

The speaker continues to elaborate on the idealistic image of America—though readers should be wary of the speaker's sincerity at this point, given the previous line in which the speaker declared their own exclusion from this version of America.

The speaker makes another direct reference to the American Dream in the first line of this stanza:

Let America be the **dream** the **dreamers dreamed**—

The obvious repetition—technically polyptoton—in this moment emphasizes just how important the notion of dreaming has always been to American identity; America has prided itself on being a place where people are empowered to imagine better lives, and indeed a better world.

The speaker's reference to the "dreamers" might also remind the reader of America's revolutionary origin. The leaders of the American Revolution sought to create a new government that was free from the tyranny that they had experienced under the rule of British monarchs. The "dreamers" could also refer to the pioneers and settlers in early American history who believed America represented a unique opportunity for better prospects. Many of these settlers had experienced persecution and hardship in their home countries and viewed America as

their chance to escape such conditions and build a new life.

The speaker also imagines "love" as the primary principle of this idealized America. For the speaker, love translates to the dissolution of oppressive governments and abusive power dynamics. From the speaker's perspective, love will create a "great strong land," thereby describing strength and love as interconnected. "Love," the speaker argues, is a major part of what prevents America from being overrun by dictators or tyrants, who selfishly scheme and exploit the people over whom they rule. Love is thus also an important component of democracy itself.

These ideas are strengthened by the speaker's language in these lines, which are filled with alliteration. Note the shared /l/ sounds of "land of love," which connects America itself to this emotion, as well as the biting /k/ sounds in "kings connive, "tyrants scheme," and "crushed." These forceful sounds add to the intensity of the speaker's proclamation in these lines.

The enjambment throughout this stanza further adds to its momentum, pushing the reader to quickly move forward through the poem—until coming to a clear, full stop in line 9:

> Let it be that great strong land of love
> Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
> That any man be crushed by one above.

After this end-stop, the speaker once again inserts a stanza of a single, parenthetical sentence that reveals the speaker's isolation from the country being described. Once again, the speaker then reiterates that America has *never* lived up to this vision that the "dreamers" imagined long ago. Everything the speaker has described just thus rings hollow; America preaches opportunity and love for all, yet the speaker has never actually experienced any of this love or opportunity.

The speaker reiterates the notion that this vision of America, however powerful in the beginning, has failed to materialize. As much as the speaker endorses these noble ideals, the sense of disappointment is undeniable. The speaker may believe in the premise of the American Dream, but the nostalgic sentiment in the first few lines has already dissipated.

LINES 11-14

O, let my ...
... air we breathe.

In this stanza, the speaker starts talking about the idea of false patriotism. Using the iconic Statue of Liberty as a metaphor for misguided patriotism, the speaker implies that those who refuse to question or challenge the status quo are not true patriots. In fact, the true patriots are those who—like the speaker—demand that America actually embody the values of its own dream, providing freedom and equal opportunity to all people. The image of equality "in the air we breathe" captures the all-encompassing nature of the equality that the speaker envisions for America.

Interestingly, this stanza represents a marked departure from the stanzas that preceded it. While the previous stanzas contain patriotic overtones (that are subsequently contradicted by stand-alone verses), this stanza begins to deviate from this pattern. If taken out of context, the first two stanzas could be interpreted as reinforcing the "false patriotism" that the speaker criticizes in these lines. The speaker implies that real progress hinges on a rejection of false patriotism, arguing that the promise of the American Dream can only become a reality once society recognizes that it has yet to be achieved.

In other words, if the American people hold onto the delusion that America was once a great land of opportunity and freedom, nothing will be accomplished. According to the speaker, America will only move forward as a nation once its citizens come to terms with the country's problematic past. And as long as America's past continues to be glorified without question, the issues that have pervaded American society from the beginning will never be resolved.

Sound adds strength to the speaker's argument. Note the strong assonance of the long /ee/ sound in these lines:

> ... be a land where Liberty
> Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
> But opportunity is real, and life is free,
> Equality is in the air we breathe.

The assonance begins in the first line of the stanza, but ramps up in intensity by the end—suggesting the speaker's impassioned tone.

Notably, this is also the last stanza that employs a traditional ABAB rhyme scheme. After this point, the poem transitions into full free verse. The speaker's departure from a traditional poetic structure coincides with the poem's increasingly radical commentary. It is almost as if the speaker's critique cannot be confined within the narrow constraints of an established form. Liberated by the pitfalls of false patriotism and the restrictions of traditional structure, the speaker can now express their honest and unfiltered thoughts about American society.

LINES 15-18

(There's never been ...
... across the stars?

Once again, the speaker denies the existence of equality and freedom in America. The repeated interjection of the speaker's personal experience establishes a contrast between the mainstream narrative that champions America's greatness and the counter-narrative that challenges this supposed greatness. The use of quotations for the phrase "homeland of the free" smacks of sarcasm and demonstrates the speaker's increasingly critical attitude.

The italicized couplet ("*Say ... stars?*") marks another shift in the poem's focus. The figure mumbling in the dark represents the perspective that tends to be obscured and overlooked in the national dialogue. The language around the figure drawing a "veil across the stars" can be interpreted multiple ways:

1. The phrase could represent a descent into the darker and more problematic aspects of American society, referencing the pitch black of a night sky without any stars to illuminate it.
2. The stars could also be interpreted as a reference to the stars on the American flag, now shrouded by the "darkness" of oppression and injustice.
3. Finally, the stars could be considered a symbol of potential success that remains out of reach for most Americans.

However it's interpreted, the imagery of the veiled stars effectively sets the stage for the speaker's critique of American culture. As the following stanzas will show, this figure is represented by various groups of people who have been disadvantaged and exploited in American society. By delving into these perspectives, the speaker is able to explore the dark underbelly of American history that is frequently obscured by false patriotism and mindless nostalgia.

LINES 19-24

I am the ...
... crush the weak.

The speaker now describes the distinct (but similar) experiences of marginalized groups in the United States. Using the anaphora of "I am the" allows the speaker to identity with these disparate groups, and in doing so to recognize that they all face exclusion from the American Dream.

Poor white Americans are described as "fooled and pushed apart," suggesting that they have been fooled into believing that the system benefits them simply because of their race. The fact that they are also "pushed apart" implies that poor white people have struggled to come together and unite under a common cause.

Black Americans are then described as "bearing slavery's scars," a reminder of the lasting consequences of slavery as an American institution. The hissing sibilance of "slavery's scars" gives the phrase an appropriately menacing, sinister feel. The speaker next touches on the "red man," meaning Native Americans—who have been "driven from the land" that they originally occupied before the arrival of the settlers. Finally, the immigrant is portrayed as simultaneously possessing and seeking hope, which speaks to the precarious position of many immigrants who travel to America in search of better opportunities.

The stanza ends on a note of great disappointment, claiming that all groups have had their hopes dashed by "the same old stupid plan." In other words, these communities continue to encounter the same inequality that America was supposed to rescue them from. The "dog eat dog" system—wherein everyone is out for themselves and those with power trample those without it—directly contradicts the values of the American Dream, and yet it is the system that has prevailed throughout American history.

LINES 25-30

I am the ...
... one's own greed!

The speaker next presents the figure of the hopeful young man who cannot escape "that ancient endless chain." Through the extensive use of anaphora (with the opening word "Of"), the speaker explains that this chain is defined by an imbalance of power in society. The impulses towards exploitation, greed, and power struggles continue to haunt America in the same manner that they have haunted every other society since ancient times.

The speaker skillfully uses enjambment to connect this "endless chain" to multiple forms of corruption and vice throughout human history. Not only does this allow the speaker to entertain an elaborate metaphor, but it also links the stanza together in a way that resembles the physical constitution of an actual chain.

These lines are filled with alliteration, assonance, and consonance as well. Note the long /ay/, /n/, and /ch/ sounds of "Tangled in that ancient endless chain," which make the line itself feel like a tangle of sound. Percussive /p/, k/, and hard /g/ sounds then dominate the rest of the stanza, adding to its sensation of forcefulness and anger:

> Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
> Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!
> Of work the men! Of take the pay!
> Of owning everything for one's own greed!

The many caesuras here—in the form of exclamation marks—further reflect the intensity of the speaker's emotions, inserting emphatic pauses into the middle of the lines.

Fittingly, in this stanza the speaker is particularly critical of the economic system in the United States. According to the speaker, American capitalism has continued the ancient tradition of the elite exploiting the labor of the masses for their own gain. The speaker condemns the elite who "take the pay" of hardworking Americans simply to maximize profit and satisfy their own greedy desires.

By perpetuating these harmful practices, the speaker argues, America is just as backwards as the countries that came before it. Despite its power as a cultural *concept*, the American Dream has done nothing to impact *real world* conditions. The structure

of society and the means of corruption have remained virtually unchanged.

LINES 31-36

I am the ...
... yet today—O, Pioneers!

The speaker next demonstrates how all oppressed groups share a complete lack of freedom within the American system. The farmer is metaphorically described as a "bondsman," or slave, to the soil. And just like a slave would be sold to their slave master, the worker is "sold to the machine" that they labor over; they have no meaningful *choice* in American society. The black American is then described as "servant to you all," indicating their universally subordinate status in supposedly equal American society.

The speaker then unifies *all* of the groups by saying "I am the people" and suggesting that *all* remain eager or "hungry" in spite of the promise offered them by the American Dream. The repetition (technically diacope) of "hungry" underscores the sheer relentlessness or inescapability of this hunger.

This stanza also features more evocative alliteration and assonance. The shared /h/ and /uh/ of "humble" and "hungry" connects the people's lowly status in society directly to their hunger. Later, the /d/ alliteration in "despite the dream" emphasizes the failure of the American Dream.

In this section, the speaker also includes an allusion to the book "O Pioneers!" which was written in 1913 by Willa Cather. The book follows the story of a Swedish-American family, the Bergsons, who migrates to the Nebraska countryside in the early 20th century. The Bergsons must turn the farmland into a lucrative business during a time when folks were abandoning the area in search of other opportunities.

The story of this individual family and their struggle overlaps with the struggles faced by millions of Americans during the time this poem was written. Just as the Bergsons must find a way to thrive under increasingly difficult circumstances, the American working-class is trying to succeed despite the obstacles of poverty and oppression. These Americans, "hungry" and deprived of the American Dream, could choose to cut their losses and flee. Instead, they have chosen to stay and persist, echoing the spirit of the pioneers who came before them.

LINES 37-40

I am the ...
... serf of kings,

In this line, the speaker outright criticizes the idea that anyone can build a better life for themselves in America if they simply put in the work and effort. The speaker describes the worker who never advanced up the ladder, instead being "bartered" or passed off to different exploitative employers throughout his life. The language of the worker being "bartered" further hints at the objectification of workers in a system that treats them more like commodities than people.

The speaker demonstrates that the promise of the American Dream is beyond the grasp of most ordinary Americans. The poor descend deeper into poverty as the years pass, undermining the cultural myth that anyone can "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" if they simply work hard enough.

The speaker then transitions into a discussion about the Old World (a reference to the kingdoms and empires of Europe), arguing that there is a strong resemblance between the aspirations of Americans today and the immigrants who settled in the Americas centuries before. The speaker relates the plight of serfs (peasants forced to work land for their lord) to the adversity experienced by many groups in present-day America, strengthening the previous comparison to slavery.

Through repetition, the American Dream is brought to the forefront of the poem once again; the speaker claims that the serfs in the Old World "dreamt" the "basic dream" that would eventually lead to the creation of the American Dream. Tragically, like the serfs who came before them, Americans have yet to achieve the freedom and equality promised by this dream.

LINES 41-46

Who dreamt a ...
... be my home—

This set of lines focuses on the persistent power of the American Dream. Again, the word "dream" itself is repeated (via polyptoton; "dreamt a dream") in line 41. The combination of asyndeton and anaphora in this line—"so strong, so brave, so true"—further creates a sort of piling up effect, reflecting the strength and purity of the ideals *behind* the American Dream. Importantly, these ideals have long been held by people like the speaker—that is, by people who have been marginalized and oppressed—and yet these are the people whom the American Dream, as it stands, leaves out.

The very concept of the American Dream is then personified. The speaker claims that the American Dream is so powerful that its courageous spirit ("mighty daring") *sings* in "every brick and stone" that has been used to build America. This personification has the effect of establishing the American Dream as its own entity. In fact, the American Dream is such a powerful cultural force that it has become integrated into the very infrastructure of American society.

The speaker also explains how the early immigrants were inspired by the first remnants of the American Dream. These immigrants, who traveled across the ocean in search of a better life, desired a new home that would be based on their own ideals and values. They believed that a new life in a new land

would give them the freedom and opportunity that they never had access to in their own societies. Thus the speaker reveals that the historical development of the American Dream began long before the United States became a sovereign nation. Despite the problems that currently face the United States, the strength and bravery of this "basic dream" lives on in the fabric of American society. The speaker suggests that the American Dream speaks to a fundamental human desire for freedom and progress, a desire which has withstood both the test of time and long-standing oppression.

LINES 47-50

For I'm the ...
... of the free."

The speaker covers a few countries that constitute the population of immigrants, indentured servants, and slaves who came to America before the establishment of the United States. A clear juxtaposition is made between the experience of European immigrants—people from Ireland, Poland, and England—and African slaves: the first group "left" of their own volition while the latter was "torn" from their homeland in Africa.

Interestingly, the speaker uses the term "Black Africa" as if to bring attention to the fact that slaves were singled out and discriminated against on the basis of their race. This line continues the poem's investment in the black experience; although the speaker is concerned with the oppression of many different groups, the unique history of slavery distinguishes the experience of Black Americans in a way that can never be matched.

This stanza ends on a sarcastic note, lamenting how the American Dream was problematic from the beginning. The speaker raises the question: how can a so-called "homeland of the free" be built on the backs of slaves? The sarcastic use of quotation marks aptly exposes the hypocrisy of this long-standing sentiment in American culture. A rigorous self-critique is clearly in order if the United States is ever going to fulfill the ideals of the American Dream. Incidentally, this is the very type of critique that the speaker engages in and escalates throughout the course of the poem.

LINES 51-55

The free? ...
... for our pay?

The speaker continues rebuking the idea that America is a "homeland of the free," tying the message directly into the context of the labor movement of the 1930s. This refers to a movement that arose during the Great Depression and pushed for greater rights and protections for vulnerable workers. "The millions on relief today" is a direct allusion to the relief programs implemented in the 1930s that provided both cash payments and temporary work projects for the unemployed.

The speaker paints a drastic picture of millions being "shot down" for protesting the devastating conditions and ongoing exploitation of the working-class. The back-to-back use of seven rhetorical questions compels the reader to ponder the contradiction between America's image as a "homeland of the free" and the vicious backlash against the labor movement. The speaker poses a difficult but important question: can America consider itself a champion of freedom if this is the response to workers fighting for their own rights? The many repeated questions in a row create a tone of exasperation and frustration as well.

In this section, the speaker also uses repetition to emphasize two central points. By continually using the word "free" and contextualizing it as a question, the reader is forced to consider whether or not the United States has *actually* achieved freedom for *all* people.

This is bolstered by the anaphora of "The millions" in reference to Americans who have become disillusioned with the American Dream. The overall effect of this repetition communicates both the absence of freedom and the growing unrest in American society. Thus Americans are becoming increasingly aware that the freedom promised to them has been nothing more than an illusion.

LINES 56-61

For all the ...
... almost dead today.

In these lines, the speaker underscores the frustration and desperation of the American people. Despite going through the motions and making all of the expected patriotic gestures, Americans are still being exploited and oppressed. The speaker also repeats a previous rhetorical question—"The millions who have nothing for our pay?"—in the form of a declarative statement:

> The millions who have nothing for our pay—

Despite working long and hard hours, the American people have "nothing for our pay," suggesting that the wages alone cannot support socioeconomic advancement or upward mobility. People are barely *surviving* on these wages, living a life far from the one depicted by the American Dream. All that is left is the "dream that's almost dead today." The alliteration between "**d**ream" and "**d**ead" suggests hopelessness, but the term "almost" is also key and foreshadows the speaker's optimistic conclusion. Although the speaker has plenty of criticisms, there is still a *glimmer* of hope that the American Dream has the potential to become a reality.

Furthermore, the speaker uses anaphora to emphasize the efforts of many Americans to remain patriotic in the face of adversity. The repeated use of the term "And all" creates a sense of exhaustion and never-ending struggle. This seems to

be a subtle response to the opposing view, which might cast protesters as ungrateful citizens who have betrayed their own country. Rather than being ungrateful, the speaker portrays a group of people who have absorbed the burdens of their country's weaknesses for far too long. The speaker makes it clear that Americans have every reason to be fed up, especially since the typical displays of patriotism have done nothing to improve their lives or standing in society.

LINES 62-70

O, let America ...
... mighty dream again.

Despite the speaker's criticisms of America, there is still hope for future generations. While the speaker fully appreciates America's troubled and hypocritical history, it becomes clear that the speaker is deeply invested in the vision of the American Dream. The ideals enshrined in the American Dream, namely of freedom and equality, are still worthy and noble goals to the speaker. In fact, the speaker asserts that America has an *obligation* to fulfill the promise of the American Dream.

This will not be possible, however, until *every* American is free. The speaker claims that every American has the right to access the American Dream, including poor people, racial minorities, and the speaker themselves! The land belongs to those whose "sweat and blood" settled and developed the communities that would eventually become the United States. The speaker firmly believes that the original creators of America are the only ones capable of restructuring America.

The speaker takes it a step further, claiming that America's obligation to fulfill its founding ideals goes beyond a sense of moral duty. The speaker declares that America "must be" the land of liberty and equality that is encapsulated in the American Dream. This implies that America is not only obligated but *destined* to realize the potential of the American Dream. Despite America's wayward path, the speaker is confident that America can rediscover its original ideals and revitalize the dream that is currently on the brink of extinction.

LINES 71-75

Sure, call me ...
... America!

The speaker knows that some people might not be pleased with the speaker for criticizing America's failure to live up to its ideals. This stanza opens with a direct response to this opposition. The speaker is not concerned with the insults that might result from the poem. The message, symbolized by the "steel of freedom," cannot be stained or tainted by anything the opposition might say. The metaphor here compares freedom to a strong metal that doesn't easily tarnish, the idea being that the virtue of freedom is so enduring and pure that it cannot be corrupted by any outside influence.

The speaker then takes aim at the upper-class, describing them in a simile as "leeches" living off of the people's lives. The speaker encourages everyone to take back the land that is rightfully theirs and create an America that lives up to its own guiding principles.

The speaker once again uses alliteration, assonance, and consonance to draw emphasis to certain words and phrases here. Note the assonance of the long /ee/ sound that connects "steel" with "freedom," for example. The alliterative /st/ sound draws attention to the fact that this "steel" does not "stain," and there also are many /l/ sounds throughout the stanza, especially in line 73:

> From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,

The possessive language of the phrase "our land," meanwhile, underscores the speaker's belief that the land belongs to ordinary Americans instead of the elite who have exploited the land and the laborers for their own profit. The speaker asserts that the elite have been hoarding the fruits of other people's labor and it is time for the working-class to reclaim what is rightfully theirs. The image of Americans taking back the land from the parasitic upper-class shows that the use of force will be necessary to rectify long-standing injustice and corruption. For the speaker, Americans must demand the liberties that they are entitled to, collectively and without apology.

LINES 76-79

O, yes, I ...
... America will be!

Here the speaker essentially recaps the poem's main argument in "plain" English. Regardless of the fact that America has still not delivered the promise of the American Dream, the speaker is confident that this will ultimately be rectified. According to the speaker, it is not simply America's obligation to actualize its founding ideals. This is America's *destiny*, and the speaker makes an "oath," or a promise, that this destiny will be fulfilled one day.

This section marks an important moment of development for the speaker. Up until this point, the speaker was mainly concerned with scrutinizing the American Dream and illuminating the empty promises and unfulfilled ideals therein. In this moment, however, the speaker takes a risk and personally promises the reader that the American Dream will be achieved one day.

The word choice is particularly salient here, as the speaker refers to this promise as an "oath," a term that is generally used when a promise is official and legally binding. Despite the dissonance between the American Dream and the reality of American life, the speaker proposes a new promise to the American people without hesitation. Perhaps this is because the speaker is calling on everyone to participate in finally making the American Dream a reality. If Americans continue to

collectively fight for their liberties, the speaker has no doubts that the people will eventually reach success.

LINES 80-86

Out of the ...
... make America again!

The final stanza contrasts the present condition of the United States with the speaker's vision of the future. The second line includes graphic and startling imagery, creating a stark contrast between the America wrecked by the upper-class and the new America subsequently described by the speaker. This imagery is emphasized through the alliterative use of the /r/ sound in "rack," "ruin," "rape," and "rot." The speaker describes the destruction of America while simultaneously professing faith in America's future. Notably, the alliteration ends with the word "redeem," demonstrating the *potential* for cultural transformation. The speaker appears to believe that anything is possible through the power of collective action and commitment to change.

The use of the phrase "We, the people" then invokes the same language in the preamble of the Constitution and this allusion places the speaker's call to action in its cultural context.

Imagery of the natural landscapes reclaimed by the American people dominates the remainder of the stanza and holds out hope that such an America will eventually reach fruition. The asyndeton in the second part of the stanza also contrasts with the polysyndeton of the first. Here's the polysyndeton of line 2:

> The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,

Vs. the asyndeton of line 83:

> The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.

Line 83 flows more smoothly, without interruption, reflecting the peace and beauty inherent to the speaker's vision of a better America. The repetition (specifically epizeuxis) of "All, all" then adds further emphasis to that *every* part of America—from sea to shining sea—belongs to the people. The speaker thus concludes the poem with optimism and enthusiasm, apparently confident in the people's power to take back America and transform it into the "homeland of the free" that it is destined to become.

SYMBOLS

AMERICA

The greatest symbol in the poem might be America itself. America is *supposed* to symbolize everything that is encapsulated in the American Dream, and the speaker frequently refers to the conventional understanding of what America is *supposed* to represent: opportunity, freedom, equality, and so on. Moreover, the speaker makes it clear that while America has symbolized these ideals and beliefs for many people throughout history, it has yet to make such ideals a reality.

As such, by the end of the poem, America is transformed into a symbol of *failure*, an example of what happens when a nation does *not* manifest its own founding beliefs. At the same time, however, America continues to represent the hope and promise of tomorrow. Despite the speaker's criticisms of America's past and present, the poem ends on an optimistic note, suggesting that America still has the potential to bring its original ideals to fruition.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "America," "America"
- **Line 5:** "America," "America"
- **Line 6:** "America"
- **Line 10:** "America"
- **Line 44:** "America"
- **Line 62:** "America," "America"
- **Line 67:** "America"
- **Line 75:** "America!"
- **Line 77:** "America," "America"
- **Line 79:** "America"
- **Line 86:** "America"

PIONEER

The figure of the pioneer is referenced multiple times throughout the poem, probably because of its important status in American culture and history. The speaker creates a connection between the original pioneers, who formed the first settlements of what would eventually become the United States, and the diverse groups of people who have built America on the backbone of their own hard labor.

The hopes and aspirations of the first pioneers, now reflected in the efforts and protests of the working-class, symbolize the spirit of early America before it was consumed by unbridled capitalism and greed. The speaker invokes this symbol of the pioneer to remind readers of what America was supposed to be about and how far it has fallen from its original message. The pioneer, seeking a new life and new opportunities, symbolizes all hard-working Americans who are striving for a better life in the United States.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "pioneer"
- **Line 36:** "Pioneers!"

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

Metaphor is used throughout the poem to highlight the speaker's commentary about the American Dream. In the first stanza, the speaker uses metaphor when comparing America to the "pioneer on the plain" seeking newfound freedom. This opening metaphor establishes the importance of the "pioneer" figure in American culture and suggests that the pioneer's trailblazing spirit lies at the heart of the American Dream.

This metaphor continues to develop into the next stanza, likening America to "the dream the dreamers dreamed," which serves as a direct reference to the American Dream. In this way, the speaker expresses hope that America will one day embody the ideals that have (so far) remained captive in American's cultural imagination.

As the speaker's commentary becomes increasingly critical of America's failure to live up to its ideals, the metaphorical language within the poem *also* assumes a more pessimistic tone. Lines 17-18 contain highly symbolic metaphors:

> *Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?*
> *And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*

Here the speaker is inviting other marginalized peoples to see themselves in this poem. Marginalized Americans "mumble[] in the dark," a metaphor that implies their exclusion from the bright promise of America. The idea of drawing a "veil across the stars" further implies a loss of hope—that these people no longer even entertain the possibility of achieving the American Dream.

The speaker metaphorically identifies with marginalized members of American society—"the poor white," "the Negro bearing slavery's scars," etc. The speaker isn't *literally* all of these people, but is instead using metaphorical language to underscore that all these disparate groups are *united* in their oppression and exclusion from the promise of America. The metaphorical reference to "slavery's scars," meanwhile, implies the lasting impact of this practice on modern Americans, while the idea of an "immigrant clutching the hope I seek" is a figurative way of saying many immigrants came to America filled with hope that America would be a place of opportunity.

Yet the speaker then describes American society as "dog eat dog," an idiom that is generally used to describe a situation where people are willing to dominate and harm each other in order to succeed. The "dog eat dog" metaphor stands in stark contrast to the "great strong land of love" encapsulated by the American Dream, revealing the ways in which the United States has continued to reinforce long-standing systems of oppression and exploitation. The speaker also describes Americans as being "Tangled in that ancient endless chain," a metaphorical reference to the power struggles that continue to benefit the wealthy and privileged at the expense of most Americans.

The speaker then once again identifies with various marginalized and oppressed groups, each of whom are metaphorically described as being slaves to their labor in a capitalist society (the "worker," for instance, has been "sold to the machine"). The speaker next becomes *all* "the people" who've been left "hungry"—both literally, due to their poverty, and figuratively, in the sense that their hunger for opportunity and advancement, things promised by the American Dream, has never been sated.

Yet the ideals behind that dream remain strong, the speaker insists, comparing it to "steel" that "does not stain." Steel is a strong metal that resists tarnish, and this metaphor suggests that enduring power of freedom as well as its ability to resist external corruption. The reference to "steel" might also make readers think of both swords and construction—thus suggesting freedom itself as a kind of weapon as well as the framework of a just society.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Let it be the dream it used to be."
- **Lines 3-4:** "Let it be the pioneer on the plain / Seeking a home where he himself is free."
- **Line 6:** "Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—"
- **Line 7:** "Let it be that great strong land of love"
- **Lines 11-12:** "O, let my land be a land where Liberty / Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,"
- **Line 14:** "Equality is in the air we breathe."
- **Lines 17-18:** "Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark? / And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?"
- **Lines 19-23:** "I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart, / I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars. / I am the red man driven from the land, / I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek— / And finding only the same old stupid plan"
- **Line 24:** "Of dog eat dog,"
- **Lines 25-27:** "I am the young man, full of strength and hope, / Tangled in that ancient endless chain / Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!"
- **Lines 31-32:** "I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil. / I am the worker sold to the machine."
- **Lines 33-38:** "I am the Negro, servant to you all. / I am the people, humble, hungry, mean— / Hungry yet today despite the dream. / Beaten yet today—O, Pioneers! / I am the man who never got ahead, / The poorest worker bartered through the years."
- **Lines 41-44:** "Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true, / That even yet its mighty daring sings / In every

brick and stone, in every furrow turned / That's made America the land it has become."
- **Line 72:** "The steel of freedom does not stain."
- **Lines 80-81:** "Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death, / The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,"

IMAGERY

This poem has an abundance of vivid imagery that serves the overall purpose of supporting the speaker's argument—that is, that America has failed to live up to the ideals on which it was founded.

One of the most powerful examples of imagery occurs in an early stanza where the speaker shares their hope that "Liberty / Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath." This line immediately invokes the image of the Statue of Liberty and her laurel wreath while advancing the speaker's critique of the American Dream. The speaker implicitly argues that false patriotism has obscured the larger goals of freedom and equality for all. Rather than confronting the injustices and inequities within American society, those who subscribe to false patriotism continue to believe that the American Dream has been achieved despite all evidence to the contrary. The speaker envisions a new America where false patriotism will be abandoned in favor of a nation that truly embodies its own ideals.

As the poem progresses, the speaker uses imagery to expand on this new vision for America. The speaker proclaims that "The steel of freedom does not stain," suggesting that the future of America will be determined by the workers who forge the aforementioned steel. Their inner strength is matched only by the physical strength of steel, a source of freedom and empowerment that could never be tarnished or "stained" in any way. Freedom will therefore always be a valuable and worthy goal, regardless of the forces that may try to oppose it. The speaker implies that the noble nature of this goal will win out in the end as the people rise up and "take back our land again" to form a new system based on equality and fairness.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "O, let my land be a land where Liberty / Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,"
- **Lines 17-18:** "Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark? / And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?"
- **Lines 25-26:** "I am the young man, full of strength and hope, / Tangled in that ancient endless chain"
- **Lines 45-50:** "O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas / In search of what I meant to be my home— / For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore, / And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea, / And torn from Black Africa's strand I came / To build a "homeland of the free.""
- **Line 72:** "The steel of freedom does not stain."
- **Lines 80-86:** "Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death, / The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies, / We, the people, must redeem / The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers. / The mountains and the endless plain— / All, all the stretch of these great green states— / And make America again!"

REPETITION

The speaker uses several different forms of repetition to emphasize the crux of the poem's argument—that American has never been the land of liberty and opportunity that it purports to be. The most obvious form of repetition in the poem is anaphora, which this guide discusses in a separate entry.

Specific words are also frequently repeated throughout the poem: America, dreamt/dream, free/freedom, home, and land/homeland. These terms directly correspond to the speaker's preoccupation with their meaning and value in society. Throughout the poem, the speaker is deeply concerned with cultural conceptions of the American Dream and how that informs both Americans' understanding of freedom and their national identity. As these phrases are repeated over and over again, the reader is compelled to reconsider their own understanding of these terms and the role they play in our cultural imagination.

Some of this repetition is specifically polyptoton: "**dreams** we've **dreamed**," "**songs** we've **sung**," and, of course, "be the **dream** the **dreamers dreamed**." The root of the word in each instance stays the same, but its form differs slightly. On the one hand, this connects American *residents* to the American Dream itself; by calling these people "dreamers," the poem insists that they *embody* the ideals on which America was founded. Polyptoton also implies that people have *actively* been pursuing the patriotic ideals behind America; they have *sung* the songs they're supposed to sing, yet America hasn't upheld its part of the bargain.

Often the repetition of these words also takes the form of diacope. For example, line 11 features diacope with the word "land":

> O, let my **land** be a **land** where Liberty

Lines 34-35 also contain diacope:

> I am the people, humble, **hungry**, mean—
> **Hungry** yet today despite the dream.

Diacope serves to add emphasis to the repeated word. For example, it underscores just *how* hungry the people are. The

diacope of "land"also creates a sense of doubling, of there being *two* versions of this land; it juxtaposes the land that *is* with the land that *should be*.

The same can be said for the two most commonly repeated phrases in the poem, both of which include diacope: "Let America Be America again" and some variation of "America never was America to me." This repetition allows the speaker to fluidly move between two perspectives of American society: first, the traditional, nostalgic perspective that views the Great Depression as the exception to an otherwise prosperous and just nation; second, the nontraditional, revolutionary perspective that views the Great Depression as a mere extension of the disenfranchisement experienced by most Americans since the beginning. By repeating these lines consistently, the speaker effectively stages a political dialogue and recreates the tensions between both sides.

Finally, there is one instance of epizeuxis with "All, all" in line 85. This quick repetition emphasizes the idea that every single part of America belongs to the people the speaker describes throughout the poem.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Let America be America again."
- **Line 2:** "dream"
- **Line 4:** "free"
- **Line 5:** "(America never was America to me.)"
- **Line 6:** "Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—"
- **Line 7:** "land"
- **Line 10:** "(It never was America to me.)"
- **Line 11:** "land," "land," "Liberty"
- **Line 13:** "free,"
- **Line 16:** "homeland," "free"
- **Line 21:** "land"
- **Line 27:** "grab the," "land"
- **Line 28:** "Of grab the gold," "Of grab the ways"
- **Line 34:** "hungry"
- **Line 35:** "Hungry," "dream"
- **Line 39:** "dreamt," "dream"
- **Line 41:** "dreamt a dream"
- **Line 44:** "America," "land"
- **Line 50:** "homeland," "free"
- **Line 51:** "free"
- **Line 52:** "free"
- **Line 56:** "dreams we've dreamed"
- **Line 57:** "songs we've sung"
- **Line 61:** "dream"
- **Line 62:** "let America be America again—"
- **Line 63:** "land"
- **Line 64:** "land," "free"
- **Line 65:** "land"
- **Line 67:** "America"
- **Line 72:** "freedom"
- **Line 74:** "land"
- **Line 75:** "America!"
- **Line 77:** "America never was America to me,"
- **Line 79:** "America"
- **Line 83:** "land"
- **Line 85:** "All, all "
- **Line 86:** "America"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is consistently used to establish the poem's rhythm and emphasize specific ideas. This is especially pronounced in the first three quatrains. The enjambment between the third and final line in the first stanza maintains the ABAB rhyme scheme, for example:

> Let it be the pioneer on the plain
> Seeking a home where he himself is free.

The speaker breaks up the phrase "the plain / Seeking" so that the final word of line 3, "plain," can rhyme with the end of the first line, "gain." This enjambment is also evocative on a more symbolic level: there is no pause or interruption between lines 3 and 4, reflecting the sense of freedom and unfettered possibility that "the pioneer" feels.

The enjambment in the second stanza does the same thing, preserving the poem's initial ABAB rhyme scheme. It also adds a sense of building anticipation to the stanza as the speaker describes a world free from cruel dictators and instead governed by love and equality for all. The enjambment allows the lines to flow quickly and ramp up in intensity—only to be crushed by the standalone revelation that this idea of America was never a reality for the speaker.

The speaker later uses enjambment to similar effect when describing the mass immigration following the European discovery of the Americas. This stanza ("Yet I'm the one who dreamt ... To build a "homeland for the free.") contains a fair amount of enjambment compared to the rest of the poem. Some of these lines are arguably end-stopped with commas, yet the pauses are still quite subtle and unobtrusive as the sentence spills down the page. As a result, the descriptions of various homelands begin to blend together, creating an effect that resonates with the concept of the "melting pot" (the common notion that the United States welcomes immigrants and their cultural contributions to larger American society).

This imagery, supported by the skillful use of enjambment, reiterates the original vision of America as a newfound source of freedom. The speaker complicates this imagery by mentioning how the slaves "torn from Black Africa's strand" did not have the choice that their European counterparts had and were forced to leave their homeland. The poem then closes this

long series of enjambment (and quiet end-stops) with a reference to the "homeland of the free," highlighting the absurdity of such an ideal within the context of a society that uses slave labor. By ending the stanza on this note, the speaker subtly suggests that the problematic origins of American society compromised the American Dream from the beginning.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "plain / Seeking"
- **Lines 7-8:** "love / Where"
- **Lines 8-9:** "scheme / That"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Liberty / Is"
- **Lines 23-24:** "plan / Of"
- **Lines 26-27:** "chain / Of"
- **Lines 39-40:** "dream / In"
- **Lines 42-43:** "sings / In"
- **Lines 43-44:** "turned / That's"
- **Lines 45-46:** "seas / In"
- **Lines 49-50:** "came / To"
- **Lines 82-83:** "redeem / The"

ALLUSION

The repeated use of the phrase "homeland of the free" appears to be an allusion to a line in the Star-Spangled Banner: "the land of the free and the home of the brave." As the national anthem of the United States, this phrasing would resonate with an American audience. Interestingly, quotation marks are always used when the phrase is mentioned in the poem, creating a sarcastic tone. The anaphora of "Let" throughout the poem might also be a subtle allusion to "America (My Country 'Tis of Thee)," which served as a de facto national anthem until the 1930s and features the famous line: "Let freedom ring." Another familiar patriotic phrase is alluded to with "We, the people" in line 82—a clear callout to the U.S. Constitution, which, of course, beings with that exact phrase.

The line "O, Pioneers!" is an allusion to a novel of the same name written in 1913 by Willa Cather. It tells the story of a young woman, hailing from a family of Swedish immigrants, who inherits the family farm and must find a way to make the business profitable while other families are shutting down their farms and giving up. The novel speaks to the persistence and work ethic of immigrant families as they established a new life in America. This allusion is nestled in a stanza that touches on various different groups that have been systematically oppressed in the United States, serving as a reminder that these folks are the true pioneers in American history. After all, America was built on the backs of farmers, industrial workers, and slaves, not the capitalists on Wall Street.

There are other allusions throughout the poem as well. For example the "Liberty" in lines 11-12—" let my land be a land where Liberty / Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,"—is possibly an allusion to the Statue of Liberty. Later, the mention of "millions on relief today" and so forth is an allusion to the work programs created by the New Deal during the Great Depression. These programs offered temporary employment to help keep American workers off the streets. The mention of strikes in these lines also alludes to the labor movements at the time, which sought for better worker protections and rights.

References to "songs we've sung" and "flags we've hung" allude to displays of patriotism—singing the anthem and waiving the American flag. There are also clear allusions to the shameful history of slavery and the slave trade ("torn from Black Africa"), the genocide of Native Americans ("I am the red man driven from the land"), European immigration, racism ("I am the Negro, servant to you all"), early explorers who "discovered" America, and the British monarchy that America rebelled against ("Where never kings connive ...").

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme / That any man be crushed by one above."
- **Lines 11-12:** "O, let my land be a land where Liberty / Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,"
- **Line 16:** ""homeland of the free.""
- **Lines 19-22:** "I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart, / I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars. / I am the red man driven from the land, / I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—"
- **Line 33:** "I am the Negro, servant to you all."
- **Line 36:** "O, Pioneers!"
- **Lines 45-46:** "O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas / In search of what I meant to be my home—"
- **Lines 47-48:** "For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore, / And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,"
- **Line 49:** "And torn from Black Africa's strand I came"
- **Line 50:** ""homeland of the free.""
- **Lines 53-55:** "The millions on relief today? / The millions shot down when we strike? / The millions who have nothing for our pay?"
- **Line 57:** "And all the songs we've sung"
- **Line 59:** "And all the flags we've hung,"
- **Line 82:** "We, the people,"

PERSONIFICATION

An extended example of personification takes place when the speaker describes the first remnants of the American Dream in the Old World. The speaker implies that the American Dream, as it is understood today, originated in the hopes of the European immigrants who traveled to the "New World" in search of a better life. The speaker explains that this dream was so strong "That even yet its mighty daring sings / In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned." In this line, the speaker personifies the American Dream itself and claims that it has become integrated into the very infrastructure of American

society. The "mighty daring," or courageous spirit, of the American Dream has caused it to become a source of hope and inspiration for subsequent generations.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 41-44:** "Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true, / That even yet its mighty daring sings / In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned / That's made America the land it has become."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

Rhetorical questions become important during one particular section of the poem. The first rhetorical question appears in liens 17-18:

> *Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?*
> *And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*

Up until this point the speaker has been calling on America to live up to the ideals on which it was founded, and interjecting that those ideals never were a reality for the speaker. With this question, the speaker is calling out to all those other Americans for whom the American Dream has proved hollow. The speaker is inviting those who "mumble[] in the dark"—a metaphor suggesting that they have been forgotten by American society—to recognize themselves in this poem. The idea of drawing a "veil across the stars" continues the symbolic connection between darkness and exclusion from the American dream, implying that marginalized people have given up on the false promise of America.

Later, the speaker uses a rhetorical question again in a stand-alone line to transition from a description of the Old World into a critique of the United States:

> The free?

In a subsequent series of more rhetorical questions, the speaker challenges the idea that most Americans are truly free. The speaker points to the labor movement as proof that Americans face brutal backlash when they reassert their rights and stand up for themselves. Not only are millions of Americans "shot down" during strikes, but they also have "nothing" for their pay, suggesting that the wage most workers receive is so meager that it essentially amounts to nothing. This sentiment coincides with an earlier description of the "poorest worker" who isn't able to advance up the socioeconomic ladder.

Through the use of successive rhetorical questions, the speaker emphasizes the injustice and cruelty of a system that promises everyone freedom and equality while denying these rights at every opportunity. The rhetorical questions and subsequent lines capture the atmosphere of hopelessness and despair that characterized the Great Depression and ultimately motivated the collective efforts of the protesters during the labor strikes of the 1930s.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-18:** "Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark? / And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?"
- **Lines 51-55:** "The free? / Who said the free? Not me? / Surely not me? The millions on relief today? / The millions shot down when we strike? / The millions who have nothing for our pay?"

CAESURA

Caesura is used several times throughout the poem for descriptive and dramatic effect. Often the caesuras are simply used to reflect the conversational nature of the poem ("Sure, call me ...") or to differentiate items of a list ("humble, hungry, mean").

There are a few instances where the use of caesura is particularly significant, however. In one of the final stanzas, caesura serves the purpose of reinforcing the speaker's argument and emphasizing the most essential ideas in the poem:

> And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free.
> The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's,
> Negro's,

After reiterating the central declaration of the poem ("The land that never has been yet—"), the speaker utilizes caesura to highlight the necessity of America fulfilling its original vision. By inserting a break in the middle of two consecutive lines, the speaker effectively emphasizes four compatible but independent points: first, that America has an obligation to make the American Dream a reality ("America must be"); second, that such a goal can never be accomplished unless all Americans are free, not just the privileged few ("the land where *every* man is free"); and finally, that the land truly belongs to the marginalized groups whose labor formed the foundation of America ("The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's"). The speaker explicitly identifies with marginalized Americans, claiming their "sweat and blood" had the ability to create America and now has the capacity to reform America in the image of its founding ideals.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "O, let"
- **Line 13:** "real, and"
- **Line 17:** "Say, who"
- **Line 19:** "white, fooled"

- **Line 24:** "dog, of "
- **Line 25:** "man, full"
- **Line 27:** "profit, power, gain, of"
- **Line 28:** "gold! Of"
- **Line 29:** "men! Of"
- **Line 31:** "farmer, bondsman"
- **Line 33:** "Negro, servant"
- **Line 34:** "people, humble, hungry, mean"
- **Line 36:** "today—O, Pioneers"
- **Line 41:** "strong, so brave, so"
- **Line 43:** "stone, in"
- **Line 45:** "O, I'm"
- **Line 48:** "plain, and"
- **Line 52:** "free? Not"
- **Line 53:** "me? The"
- **Line 62:** "O, let"
- **Line 64:** "be—the"
- **Line 65:** "mine—the," "man's, Indian's, Negro's"
- **Line 68:** "blood, whose"
- **Line 69:** "foundry, whose"
- **Line 71:** "Sure, call"
- **Line 76:** "O, yes, I"
- **Line 81:** "graft, and stealth, and"
- **Line 82:** "We, the people, must"
- **Line 83:** "land, the mines, the plants, the"
- **Line 85:** "All, all"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is used extensively in this poem. Specific phrases are continuously repeated throughout, creating a sense of thematic continuity. The first stanza illustrates this perfectly with its repeated use of "Let America be" or "Let it be," a phrase that embodies the poem's overall objective: promoting a return to the original values that the American Dream is built on.

Anaphora is used again in the repeated use of "I am" while the speaker describes the experiences of oppressed groups:

> I am the poor white ...
> I am the Negro ...
> I am the red man ...
> I am the immigrant ...

The successive use of this phrase fosters a sense of unity and community among the groups, recreating a shared experience of oppression and struggle. This is replicated once again in a later stanza that explores the common thread binding all marginalized groups together: a lack of freedom:

> I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
> I am the worker sold to the machine.
> I am the Negro, servant to you all.
> I am the people, humble, hungry, mean—

Anaphora also functions as a method for expanding on certain ideas within the poem. For example, four lines in a row use the preposition "Of" at the beginning of each sentence:

> Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
> Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!
> Of work the men! Of take the pay!
> Of owning everything for one's own greed!

This allows each line to connect back to the primary action, "Tangled in that ancient endless chain." Through anaphora, the speaker is able to delve into great detail about what this "endless chain" entails and condemn the historical cycle of greed and exploitation.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Let America be America again."
- **Line 2:** "Let it be"
- **Line 3:** "Let it be"
- **Line 6:** "Let America be"
- **Line 7:** "Let it be"
- **Line 19:** "I am"
- **Line 20:** "I am"
- **Line 21:** "I am"
- **Line 22:** "I am"
- **Line 24:** "Of," "of"
- **Line 25:** "I am"
- **Line 27:** "Of"
- **Line 28:** "Of," "Of"
- **Line 29:** "Of," "Of"
- **Line 30:** "Of"
- **Line 31:** "I am"
- **Line 32:** "I am"
- **Line 33:** "I am"
- **Line 34:** "I am"
- **Line 37:** "I am"
- **Line 39:** "I'm the one"
- **Line 47:** "I'm the one"
- **Line 53:** "The millions"
- **Line 54:** "The millions"
- **Line 55:** "The millions"
- **Line 56:** "For all the"
- **Line 57:** "And all the"
- **Line 58:** "And all the"
- **Line 59:** "And all the"
- **Line 60:** "The millions"
- **Line 68:** "Whose," "whose"
- **Line 69:** "Whose," "whose"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is a prevalent device throughout the poem. Often

this alliteration serves to draw readers' attention to or draw connections between certain phrases. Take "pioneer" and "plain" in the first stanza, which links the explorer to the American land itself, underscoring the American ideals of freedom and opportunity. Alliteration later connects "land" to "love" and "liberty," again suggesting an essential connection between America and its ideals.

While alliteration is used to support this positive imagery, it also reinforces the negative aspects of the speaker's commentary. For instance, in the second quatrain, note the alliterative /k/ sound of "kings connive," "scheme," and "crushed." This is a hard, biting sound that evokes the lines' content, making readers feel the speaker's disdain for such displays of harsh tyranny.

Later, the alliteration (and sibilance) of "slavery's scars" creates a sinister hissing sound that reflects the horror of the image being described. Sibilance also appears later in the same stanza. The hissing /s/ sound connects "seek" to "same old stupid plan," underscoring how the immigrant's dream for a better life simply becomes a part of the cycle of oppression and greed.

Another striking use of alliteration is noticeable in the beginning of the final stanza, with the repeated use of words beginning with an /r/ sound—all of which have highly negative connotations:

> Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
> The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
> We, the people, must redeem

The guttural /r/ sound feels oppressive, even overwhelming in these first two lines. But it then appears in a positive word: "redeem." Despite the "rack and ruin" that has overwhelmed American society, the speaker remains hopeful that America can be redeemed once and for all. Thus the alliteration sets up a stark contrast between the current state of affairs and the speaker's vision for a new and improved America.

Consonance and assonance are used in addition to alliteration throughout. These devices reinforce each other and help maintain the poem's rhythm. The musical quality and tone of the poem is also advanced by the combined use of these three devices. For example, the eighth stanza uses all three devices to reflect the speaker's anger:

> I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
> And finding only the same old stupid plan
> Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

The hard /p/, /k/, and /g/ sounds, combined with the hissing /s/ sounds and round /o/ sounds, gives the stanza an intense, bitter tone reflective of the speaker's disillusionment.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "America," "America," "again"
- **Line 3:** "pioneer," "plain"
- **Line 4:** "home," "he himself"
- **Line 6:** "dream," "dreamers dreamed"
- **Line 7:** "land," "love"
- **Line 8:** "kings connive," "scheme"
- **Line 9:** "crushed"
- **Line 11:** "let," "land," "land," "Liberty"
- **Line 19:** "poor," "pushed apart"
- **Line 20:** "slavery's scars"
- **Line 22:** "seek"
- **Line 23:** "same," "stupid"
- **Line 27:** "profit," "power," "gain," "grab"
- **Line 28:** "grab," "gold," "grab"
- **Line 29:** "pay"
- **Line 30:** "greed"
- **Line 34:** "humble," "hungry"
- **Line 35:** "Hungry," "despite," "dream"
- **Line 39:** "dreamt," "dream"
- **Line 40:** "still," "serf"
- **Line 41:** "dreamt," "dream," "so strong," "so," "so"
- **Line 42:** "sings"
- **Line 43:** "stone"
- **Line 45:** "sailed," "seas"
- **Line 46:** "search"
- **Line 48:** "Poland's plain"
- **Line 56:** "dreams," "dreamed"
- **Line 57:** "songs," "sung"
- **Line 58:** "hopes," "held"
- **Line 61:** "dream," "dead"
- **Line 62:** "America," "America again"
- **Line 70:** "bring back"
- **Line 72:** "steel," "stain"
- **Line 73:** "live like leeches," "lives"
- **Line 80:** "rack," "ruin," "gangster"
- **Line 81:** "rape," "rot," "graft"
- **Line 82:** "redeem"
- **Line 85:** "stretch," "great green," "states"
- **Line 86:** "America again"

ASSONANCE

Despite not having a regular rhyme scheme or form, this is a very musical, rhythmic poem. Much of that is due to the poem's frequent use of assonance. Combined with the poem's abundance of alliteration and consonance, the lines feel distinctly lyrical throughout.

Much of this assonance does more than make the poem feel musical, however. For example, take the long /ee/ sound that echoes throughout the poem from start to finish. This sound, of course, is contained within the words "dream," "freedom," and "me," all of which are also repeated quite often. It is as if the

speaker, the American dream, and the concept of freedom are all constantly *present* in the poem.

This is especially clear in the third quatrain, as well as in the short couplet that follows:

> O, let my land be a land where Liberty
> Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
> But opportunity is real, and life is free,
> Equality is in the air we breathe.
> (There's never been equality for me,
> Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

The /ee/ sounds in the quatrain infuse the stanza with the sound, literally, of "freedom" and "equality." This is fitting, given that this stanza implores America to be a place where the ideals of the American Dream suffuse the very air itself.

The next stanza, however, picks up on this /ee/ sound in order to *negate* the idea that this is how America really is. The speaker talks about themselves—"me"—insisting via this shared /ee/ sound that they are *part* of America, and that they *too* deserve the freedom promised to all.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "America," "America again"
- **Line 2:** "be," "dream," "be"
- **Line 4:** "Seeking," "free"
- **Line 5:** "me"
- **Line 6:** "be," "dream," "dreamers," "dreamed"
- **Line 8:** "connive," "tyrants"
- **Line 9:** "crushed," "one above"
- **Line 11:** "be," "Liberty"
- **Line 12:** "wreath"
- **Line 13:** "opportunity," "real," "free"
- **Line 14:** "Equality," "we breathe"
- **Line 15:** "equality," "me"
- **Line 16:** "freedom," "free"
- **Line 17:** "who," "you," "dark"
- **Line 18:** "who," "you," "stars"
- **Line 19:** "apart"
- **Line 20:** "scars"
- **Line 22:** "hope," "seek"
- **Line 23:** "only," "old"
- **Line 24:** "eat," "mighty," "weak"
- **Line 26:** "Tangled," "ancient," "chain"
- **Line 27:** "gain"
- **Line 28:** "ways," "need"
- **Line 29:** "take," "pay"
- **Line 30:** "greed"
- **Line 34:** "people," "humble," "hungry," "mean"
- **Line 35:** "Hungry," "dream"
- **Line 36:** "Beaten"
- **Line 38:** "years"
- **Line 39:** "dream"
- **Line 48:** "lea"
- **Line 49:** "Black Africa's"
- **Line 50:** "free"
- **Line 51:** "free"
- **Line 52:** "free," "me"
- **Line 53:** "Surely," "me," "relief"
- **Line 56:** "dreams," "dreamed"
- **Line 62:** "let," "again"
- **Line 63:** "never," "been," "yet"
- **Line 64:** "yet," "be," "land," "every," "man," "free"
- **Line 68:** "faith," "pain"
- **Line 69:** "foundry," "plow," "rain"
- **Line 70:** "again"
- **Line 72:** "steel," "freedom," "stain"
- **Line 73:** "leeches," "people's"
- **Line 74:** "again"
- **Line 76:** "say," "plain"
- **Line 77:** "me"
- **Line 79:** "be"
- **Line 82:** "We," "people," "redeem"
- **Line 83:** "land," "plants"
- **Line 84:** "plain"
- **Line 85:** "great," "states"
- **Line 86:** "make"

VOCABULARY

Pioneer (Line 3, Line 36) - A pioneer is a person who is the first to explore or settle a new country or area. In the poem, the speaker refers to the pioneers who formed the settlements that would eventually become the United States.

Connive (Line 8) - To connive means to secretly allow something to occur, especially when the act is immoral, illegal, wrong, or harmful.

Tyrant (Line 8) - A tyrant is a cruel and oppressive leader or ruler.

Red man (Line 21) - An informal, and in modern usage racist, term for a Native American.

Bondsman (Line 31) - In this context, the speaker is using "bondsman" to refer to a slave. This archaic use of the term demonstrates how poor farmers are oppressed within their own industry, thereby making them a slave to the very soil that supports their livelihood.

Barter (Line 38) - Bartering is the process of exchanging goods or services without the use of money. Interestingly, the poem states that the worker himself has been "bartered through the years," suggesting that the poor worker's labor amounted to such insignificant compensation that it might as well be nothing.

Serf (Line 40) - Under the feudal system of Medieval Europe, a serf was a servant who was bound to work on his lord's estate, usually in the form of agricultural labor.

Relief (Line 53) - In this context, "relief" refers to assistance for those in need, especially in the form of money, food, clothing, or shelter. The speaker mentions the millions of Americans receiving government assistance to emphasize the economic devastation of the Great Depression and the inability of ordinary Americans to make ends meet.

Foundry (Line 69) - A foundry is a workshop or factory for casting metal.

Graft (Line 81) - Considering that this line is discussing stealth and lies, the speaker is using the term "graft" to refer to political corruption, particularly bribery.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

As a free verse poem, "Let America Be America Again" does not follow a traditional structure. Rather, it contains a variety of stanza forms and abandons any semblance of structure midway through the poem. The first five stanzas are made up of three quatrains interspersed with two stand-alone single-line stanzas.

The first fourteen lines of the poem closely—though not completely—resembles a Shakespearean sonnet—a poem of 14 lines made up of three quatrains and ending with a two-line rhyming couplet. The rhyme scheme of a sonnet is also ABAB, which is the exact rhyme scheme for the quatrains here. The final couplet of a sonnet presents a complication to or resolution of the argument at hand. Hughes's poem, in the beginning, is thus very much a nod to this classic form. There are three quatrains with ABAB rhyme schemes, though in "Let America Be America Again" one could argue that the rhyming couplet that offers a twist on everything that has come before has been split up into the two one-line stanzas that make up lines 5 and 10.

The generally traditional structure of the beginning of the poem makes sense: the opening of the poem conforms to traditional descriptions of America as a place defined by liberty, equality, and freedom. Yet the standalone lines between these stanzas—"(America never was America to me.)" and "(It never was America to me.)"—break up that sonnet pattern. They disrupt the pretty, contained vision of America with the speaker's experience—reflecting, on a thematic level, how the experiences of marginalized Americans disrupt the idealized vision of the American Dream.

After this, the poem's form departs from any conventional structure whatsoever. The remainder of the poem does not have any established meter or rhyme scheme, resulting in a combination of long and sprawling stanzas, concise quatrains, and independent verses with various types of rhyme and meter.

This *lack* of structure is itself evocative. The speaker is no longer pretending that America conforms to its neat, tidy image in popular culture. Instead, it is a messy place, riddled with inconsistencies and inequalities—ideas reflected in the unpredictable form of the poem.

METER

The poem, overall, can be considered free verse. The first few stanzas do seem to approximate iambic pentameter (five iambs, or poetic feet with a da DUM rhythm, per line). Not coincidentally this is the meter used in Shakespearean sonnets (as noted in our Form discussion, the opening of this poem closely resembles a modified sonnet). Take lines 2-4:

> Let | it be | the dream | it used | to be.
> Let | it be | the pi | oneer | on the plain
> Seeking | a home | where he | himself | is free.

This meter is only loosely upheld and has a lot of variations. The first two lines are missing their initial unstressed beats, making them something called headless catalectic; line 3 ends with an anapest ("on the plain"); line 4 opens with a trochee ("Seeking"). Even so, in general, these quatrains certainly *feel* more metrically regular than the rest of the poem.

After the third quatrain, however, any approximation of iambic pentameter is abandoned altogether and no set meter is consistently used for the remainder of the poem. This transition coincides with the end of a consistent rhyme scheme, indicating an overall departure from traditional structure and poetic convention.

This shift occurs as the poem becomes more radical in its political commentary, almost as if Hughes's revolutionary message cannot be contained within a traditional meter. Therefore, the unconventional meter appears to match the revolutionary nature of the speaker's argument. In this sense, the metric pattern of the poem transforms in conjunction with the poem's critique of American society.

RHYME SCHEME

The poems first three quatrains follow a clear ABAB rhyme scheme. For example:

> Let America be America again.
> Let it be the dream it used to *be*.
> Let it be the pioneer on the plain
> Seeking a home where he himself is *free*.

And so forth. (Note that "again" and "plain" are technically slant rhymes.) There are then two rhyming couplets in a row once the quatrains end:

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

And:

Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?

Again, as noted in our discussions of the poem's form and meter, this first chunk thus very closely resembles a Shakespearean sonnet—which consists of three quatrains rhymed ABAB followed by a rhyming couplet.

Except, again, these quatrains with the ABAB pattern are *separated* by standalone verses. These verses break the clean, recognizable pattern of rhyme, reflecting the way in which the speaker's experiences deflate the idealized vision of America.

After the narrative shift signaled by the italicized couplet (quoted above), this consistent rhyme scheme is abandoned, but the poem continues to frequently employ internal and slant rhyme. End rhyme continues to be used as well, but there is no consistent structure to it.

Interestingly, this shift in rhyme scheme coincides with a shift thematic content. In the beginning, the stanzas are mostly designed to reiterate orthodox and patriotic beliefs about American culture. As the poem progresses and becomes increasingly more critical of its subject, the traditional rhyme scheme is abandoned and replaced with a complex form of free verse. Just as the speaker rejects the traditional notion of the American Dream, the poem pushes the boundaries of traditional poetry and effectively combines both conventional and unconventional rhyme schemes.

SPEAKER

The speaker is quickly established as a critic of American society whose goal is to reveal the shortcomings and failures of the American Dream. At first, the speaker appears to only discuss their *personal* disappointment with the American Dream, explaining how their individual experience in the United States has not lived up to the promise of freedom and opportunity.

Throughout the poem, however, the speaker assumes various identities that represent the diversity of American society: African-Americans, immigrants, Native-Americans, the working class, and so on. The speaker uses the experiences and perspectives of these groups to craft a larger commentary about oppression in the United States. The speaker thus embodies the experiences of anyone who has been failed by the empty promise of the American Dream.

The speaker's perspective closely relates to the life experiences of the poet, Langston Hughes. During the 1930s, when the poem was written, Hughes was dealing with his own financial hardship and struggling to support himself as a writer. In the midst of his own economic adversity, he realized that many Americans were coping with the same challenges and inequities. The speaker's disillusionment with the American Dream parallels the same disillusionment that Hughes experienced in the wake of the Great Depression.

SETTING

"Let America Be America Again" is, of course, set in the United States. Various allusions suggest that it takes place more specifically during the Great Depression and the subsequent labor movement that sought to address the problems brought on by this economic crisis. These include the references to the "millions on relief today," which is a nod to the temporary work programs of the 1930s meant to help curb rampant unemployment.

The poem also fluctuates between other periods in history in order to explore the historical and cultural experiences of various groups in the United States. It nods to "Old World" feudal Europe, with its serfs and kings; to early explorers who set off to settle the "New World"; to the slave trade; and so forth. By interweaving these timelines, the speaker demonstrates how contemporary society has not killed the American Dream, but rather exposed the false and empty nature of it all along.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Langston Hughes wrote this poem following his massive success as a writer during the 1920s. Hughes gained fame through his contributions to the Harlem Renaissance, a social and literary movement in New York City that championed the self-expression and empowerment of black communities. As a leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes received both critical acclaim and commercial success for his literary portrayals of the black experience in the United States when Jim Crow was still the law of the land.

Despite his early success as a young writer, Hughes's literary prowess was not immune to the devastating impact of the Great Depression. By the early 1930s, Hughes was struggling to support himself and felt as though all of his previous success had been stripped from his life and work. It was in this mindset that he wrote "Let America Be America Again" in a single day with minimal revisions. The poem emerges as a reflection of Hughes's disappointment with the trajectory of not only his own career, but of the country as a whole. His frustration with his own descent into poverty, combined with his acknowledgment that most of the country was experiencing

similar struggles, inspired his poetic refutation of the American Dream.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although this work is strongly influenced by the personal life of its poet, it is also the direct product of the Great Depression and the social unrest that followed the stock market crash of 1929. As unemployment escalated to 25 percent of the U.S. population, Americans experienced unprecedented levels of poverty and economic instability into the 1930s. While the economic downturn continued, Americans became increasingly critical of the widening gap between the rich upper-class and ordinary Americans.

These social tensions paved the way for the labor movement in the 1930s, which demanded greater rights and protections for workers who were left vulnerable and destitute during the Great Depression. The protests of the labor movement, which Hughes alludes to in the poem, eventually led to the development of unions and the passage of labor laws that mitigated the power imbalance between employer and laborer. Hughes grounds his poem in the center of this political struggle, suggesting that protesters are fighting for the same rights and liberties that were promised to them by the American Dream.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a full reading of the poem by Danez Smith at The Loft Literary Center. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6Im4b3kdfc)
- The Great Depression — A resource for those interested in learning more about the Great Depression and its lasting impact on American society. (https://www.history.com/topics/great-depression)
- Biography of Langston Hughes — A biographical account of Hughes's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/langston-hughes)
- The Harlem Renaissance — A detailed overview of the Harlem Renaissance and its impact on American literature. (https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art)
- The Legacy of Langston Hughes — An NPR podcast covering the life and work of Langston Hughes, including a reading and discussion of "Let America Be America Again." (https://www.npr.org/2012/02/02/146297228/celebrating-the-legacy-of-langston-hughes)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LANGSTON HUGHES POEMS

- I, Too
- Mother to Son
- The Ballad of the Landlord
- Theme for English B
- The Negro Speaks of Rivers
- The Weary Blues

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Zevanove, Samantha. "*Let America Be America Again.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 28 Oct 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Zevanove, Samantha. "*Let America Be America Again.*" LitCharts LLC, October 28, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/langston-hughes/let-america-be-america-again.