Aunt Sue's Stories

POEM TEXT

Aunt Sue has a head full of stories.
Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories.
Summer nights on the front porch
Aunt Sue cuddles a brown-faced child to her bosom
And tells him stories.

Black slaves
Working in the hot sun,
And black slaves
Walking in the dewy night,
And black slaves
Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river
Mingle themselves softly
In the flow of old Aunt Sue's voice,
Mingle themselves softly
In the dark shadows that cross and recross
Aunt Sue's stories.

And the dark-faced child, listening,
Knows that Aunt Sue's stories are real stories.
He knows that Aunt Sue never got her stories
Out of any book at all,
But that they came
Right out of her own life.

The dark-faced child is quiet
Of a summer night
Listening to Aunt Sue's stories.

SUMMARY

The speaker says that Aunt Sue's mind and heart are practically bursting with stories. On summer evenings, a young Black boy sits on the front porch with her, his face pressed against her chest, and she shares her stories with him.

She tells him about enslaved Black people toiling in the summer heat, enslaved Black people treading through the wet night, and enslaved Black people singing heart-wrenching songs beside a powerful river. All these stories mix gently together in the rhythm of his aunt's storytelling voice. They seem to mix gently with the dark silhouettes that move back and forth in her stories.

The young Black boy understands that his aunt's stories are true. She didn't read them in some book—they're stories of her actual life.

He sits there in complete silence on those summer nights, paying close attention to his aunt's tales of the past.

THEMES

STORYTELLING AND FAMILY MEMORY

"Aunt Sue's Stories" portrays storytelling as a powerful means of preserving family memory and connecting generations. The speaker describes a child (perhaps a younger version of himself) listening reverently to his Aunt Sue's stories about "her own life." Listening to elders' stories, the poem suggests, is a way of keeping the past alive, connecting with one's ancestors, and better understanding where one comes from. The poem also specifically illustrates the importance of the storytelling within Black communities, whose oral traditions have long been vital means of preserving knowledge and strengthening cultural ties.

The poem describes "Summer nights" on which Aunt Sue "cuddles" a young boy—likely her nephew—against her chest and shares stories from her life. The tenderness of the scene suggests the love bond they share and implies that storytelling is a means of bringing generations closer together. Aunt Sue isn't telling stories solely to entertain the boy, however, but to help him understand where he comes from and what his family has lived through. In sharing "real" stories of "her own life" during slavery, the speaker's aunt passes her memories on to the next generation and ensures that her experiences won't be forgotten.

By listening quietly and paying close attention to his aunt's stories, the child does his part in keeping his family's memories alive. The child is "quiet" when his aunt speaks, seemingly solemn with the knowledge that his aunt's stories "are real stories" that come "Right out of her own life." Taking these stories in, the poem suggests, is a way of respecting and protecting his family's history. (Again, the child may represent a younger version of the speaker, so the poem itself may be a means of carrying on this legacy.)

The poem also nods to the significance of oral storytelling traditions in Black families. Oral storytelling has specific relevance for Black Americans, who, by and large, were unable to write down their experiences in Aunt Sue's time. Because laws forbade enslaved people from learning to read and write, Black people of this period kept their stories alive primarily through spoken word and song. This practice also connected

Black people to their African ancestors, many of whose cultures had rich oral traditions that slaveholders forcibly suppressed. By listening to Aunt Sue's stories, then, the child honors his immediate *ancestors* as well as his deeper *ancestry*. Storytelling, in this poem, preserves both familial and cultural memory.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 12-16
- Lines 23-25

BLACK HISTORY AND THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY

Hughes's poem conveys the importance of acknowledging the legacy of slavery. Aunt Sue's stories aren't about just anything: they are specifically tales of "Black slaves" and their "sorrow songs." The poem suggests that the "dark shadows" of slavery fall across time and generations; slavery's legacy continues to affect the lives of those born after it ended.

The speaker explains that stories of "Black slaves" toiling night and day come together "In the flow of old Aunt Sue's voice." They "Mingle themselves softly" in her words, suggesting that her stories are a kind of tapestry weaving together countless Black experiences. Her stories ensure that the next generation will know the "sorrow songs" their elders once sang. That is, they will understand the pain and trauma that enslaved people endured.

Even the listening "child" knows his aunt's stories are "real" and don't come from "any book at all." In other words, these stories aren't fairy tales, folklore, or myths. By stressing their "real[ity]," the poem suggests the importance of knowing the truth about one's heritage. The speaker's insistence that Aunt Sue's stories are "real" is an insistence on the reality of slavery itself—a refusal to mythologize, gloss over, or forget what people like Aunt Sue lived through. When Aunt Sue describes "Black slaves / Working in the hot sun," she isn't dredging up ancient history—she's talking about her own life and people she knew: her own relatives, friends, and so on. Hearing her recount these stories, the child (who may be a younger version of the speaker) grasps that he isn't far removed from the "sorrow" of slavery. As he absorbs her stories, the child takes on the weight of that sorrow.

The poem therefore illustrates how the legacy of slavery didn't disappear the moment slavery ended. For later generations of Black Americans, its trauma lives on. Knowing what their ancestors lived through, the poem suggests, helps them understand their own lives.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-11
- Lines 17-22

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Aunt Sue has a head full of stories.
Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories.
Summer nights on the front porch
Aunt Sue cuddles a brown-faced child to her bosom
And tells him stories.

The poem begins by describing a woman known simply as "Aunt Sue," who is hugging a "child" and telling him "stories." Aunt Sue may be the child's aunt, the speaker's, or both (if the child is interpreted as the speaker's younger self). The language of the opening lines is plain and full of repetition:

> Aunt Sue has a head full of stories.
> Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories.

Notice the use of anaphora (the repetition of "Aunt Sue has a"), epistrophe (the repetition of "full of stories"), and more general parallelism (these sentences are structured in the exact same way). All of this repetition creates instant rhythm and musicality, carrying readers along as if they, too, are privy to "Aunt Sue's Stories."

At the same time, the parallelism draws attention to the few words that *aren't* repeated: "head" and "whole heart." In this way, the poem juxtaposes having a "*head* full of stories" and a "whole *heart* full" of them, suggesting that the two are subtly different. Aunt Sue isn't just someone who likes to dream up tall tales or recite interesting anecdotes; rather, she's someone who carries so many stories inside of her that she's practically overflowing with them. That they come from the "heart" suggests they are deeply significant to her; they are either personal memories or the memories of those who came before her and likewise passed them down.

Repetition isn't the only effect that creates rhythm and emphasis here. This first stanza is also full of alliteration and sibilance. The /h/ sounds in "**h**ead" and "**wh**ole **h**eart," for example, further stress the contrast between stories that come from the mind and those that come from deep inside. Aunt Sue seems to have both, but the stronger alliteration of "**wh**ole **h**eart" places greater emphasis on the second kind.

Meanwhile, sibilance adds to the poem's gentle tone:

> Summer nights on the front porch
> Aunt Sue cuddles a brown-faced child to her bosom
> And tells him stories.

The soft /s/ sounds mirror the softness of Aunt Sue's embrace as she "cuddles" this "child to her bosom." They also suggest the tenderness with which she shares her stories.

The poem is written in free verse, so it doesn't use a meter or rhyme scheme. Instead, its repetition and alliteration create more natural, conversational rhythms. In this way, its sound matches its subject: intimate storytelling. These free-flowing, yet rhythmic lines evoke Aunt Sue's kind of narration: sitting on "front porch[es]" during the "Summer," holding a relative close, and speaking from the "heart."

LINES 6-11

Black slaves
Working in the hot sun,
And black slaves
Walking in the dewy night,
And black slaves
Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river

In the second stanza, the speaker describes the kinds of stories Aunt Sue would tell the "brown-faced child" nestled against her heart:

> Black slaves
> Working in the hot sun,
> And black slaves
> Walking in the dewy night,

In other words, Aunt Sue is passing down stories about what older generations of Black people lived through. It isn't yet clear whether Aunt Sue *herself* lived through slavery, or whether she, too, grew up hearing stories about it from relatives. Later, the claim that the stories come "Right out of her own life" (lines 21-22) strongly implies that she was enslaved herself. In any case, the way she carries these stories in her "heart" suggests that they've deeply impacted her life.

Anaphora and parallelism continue to add rhythm and emphasis to the poem. The recurring phrase "Black slaves," in particular, centers and elevates people who were not valued as human beings in their own time. The poem retroactively restores their importance and acknowledges what they went through, suggesting, through repetition, how the legacy of slavery continues.

In lines 10-11, the speaker describes these same "black slaves / Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river." This is almost certainly a reference to the Mississippi River, which held great significance for Black people during the centuries of American slavery. The Mississippi was where families and friends were often torn apart, as slaveholders bought and sold Black people and sent them to distant plantations by way of the river. So these "sorrow songs" are songs of separation and loss. Abundant sibilance ("slaves / Singing sorrow songs") lends a hushed gravity to this moment, suggesting the weight of the stories Aunt Sue is sharing with this young child. These stories will contextualize the child's life, helping him to understand where he comes from and what people like him have been through.

Notice how alternating enjambed and end-stopped lines create a strong rhythm in lines 6-10, evoking the rhythms of the "songs" mentioned in line 11.

LINES 12-16

Mingle themselves softly
In the flow of old Aunt Sue's voice,
Mingle themselves softly
In the dark shadows that cross and recross
Aunt Sue's stories.

Lines 12-16 describe how the stories of "Black slaves" from older generations "Mingle themselves softly / In the flow of Aunt Sue's voice." Continued sibilance blends the sounds of the lines softly together, evoking this "Mingl[ing]," or mixing, of stories. Thanks to the soft /s/ sounds in "themselves," "softly," "Sue's," etc., the reader can almost hear Aunt Sue's gentle voice as it envelops the listening child.

Notice the continued use of anaphora and parallelism:

> Mingle themselves softly
> In the flow of Aunt Sue's voice,
> Mingle themselves softly
> In the dark shadows that cross and recross

Here, repetition evokes the very thing the speaker is describing: the way Aunt Sue's voice weaves together past and present. She isn't just telling stories from her own life; she's telling stories from the lives of many others who came before her. The "dark shadows" passing through her stories might be interpreted as the spirits of ancestors—or the long, traumatic impact of slavery itself. In any case, by sharing these stories with the little boy, Aunt Sue is introducing a new generation to an unwritten but still-remembered history.

The enjambments across lines 10-13 and lines 14-16 increase the poem's momentum, suggesting the dramatic sweep and force of Aunt Sue's stories.

LINES 17-22

And the dark-faced child, listening,
Knows that Aunt Sue's stories are real stories.
He knows that Aunt Sue never got her stories
Out of any book at all,
But that they came
Right out of her own life.

The third stanza asserts that "the dark-faced child" listening to Aunt Sue "Knows that [her] stories are real stories." The speaker elaborates:

He knows that Aunt Sue never got her stories
Out of any book at all,
But that they came
Right out of her own life.

In other words, these stories aren't myths or folktales; their origins aren't from such a distant past that their authenticity is up for debate. By insisting that these stories are "real," the speaker (and the poem) insists on the reality of slavery itself. "Black slaves" really existed, and their lives were unthinkably difficult. While white-authored history books may exclude the daily realities of enslaved people, the enslaved had their own histories, their own memories, which they've passed down to younger generations.

That the child "Knows," without a doubt, how authentic Aunt Sue's stories are suggests that he may already have experienced some of the legacy of slavery himself. Perhaps Aunt Sue's stories ring true because they offer context for experiences (such as racial hostility) that he didn't understand before.

The repetition of the word "stories" throughout the poem (not only in lines 18-19 but in the title and lines 1, 2, 5, 16, and 25) mimics the way stories are retold from one generation to the next. Through this device, the poem also emphasizes the importance of the Black oral tradition. Even before slavery, many cultures throughout the world, including many African cultures, relied primarily on oral rather than written storytelling. The poem's embrace of—and *belief* in—Aunt Sue's stories suggests that Black people's unwritten histories are valid and significant.

LINES 23-25

The dark-faced child is quiet
Of a summer night
Listening to Aunt Sue's stories.

In the last stanza, the speaker again notes how attentively the child is "Listening" to Aunt Sue. The speaker describes him as "quiet," whether because the stories are sobering, because he's respectfully absorbing the experience of older generations, or both. Regardless, the description underlines the role of younger people in maintaining an oral tradition. Unlike written stories, which may be forgotten and then rediscovered centuries later, verbal stories require direct links between one generation and the next. They can't continue without someone *telling* them, and someone else *listening*.

Notice, too, that these closing lines repeat some key words and images. The speaker again mentions that this is a "dark-faced child," stressing who this poem is about and for: Black people. Black people in particular have had to rely on oral storytelling to preserve their histories. Black people in particular face the danger of having their histories erased (by white writers, historians, etc.) if they themselves do not keep these histories alive.

The speaker also re-emphasizes the setting: these stories are being told on "summer night[s]." There's a privacy and intimacy to this setting; these stories aren't being shared publicly, in broad daylight, but rather between two people, at home, in the darkness. This detail may reflect the way Black stories have historically been ignored, rejected, or punished in white-dominated public spaces. Because there has often been a danger to perpetuating Black history, to preserving the truth about what slavery was like, this truth has often been relegated to the shadows or confined to family anecdotes. The Black oral tradition wasn't just necessary because most enslaved people couldn't read or write; it was necessary because white society treated Black history as illicit and/or unreal. Hughes's poem takes the opposite stance: it illustrates the unthinkable oppression Black people have lived through and suggests how vital it is that their "real stories" live on.

SYMBOLS

THE RIVER

The "mighty river" in line 11 almost certainly refers to the Mississippi River. For enslaved Americans, the Mississippi was a symbol of sorrow and trauma. Slaveholders frequently broke up enslaved families and shipped enslaved individuals down the Mississippi to other plantations ("sold them down the river"). Hence the river's association with "sorrow songs," which were laments for lost family and friends.

In the poem, the river is also symbolically associated with the flow of time, the flow of narrative, and the continuity of generations. The "songs" sung by the river, for example, return in "the flow of old Aunt Sue's voice" (line 13), as if Aunt Sue's stories were carrying on her ancestors' (and/or her own) experiences by the Mississippi. Just as a river flows inexorably on its course, the poem suggests, time hurries on, one generation creates the next, and stories travel down the centuries.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river"

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The poem uses repetition to create rhythm and musicality while mirroring the way stories get passed down from one generation to the next.

Lines 1-2, for example, use a combination of anaphora, epistrophe, and more general parallelism:

> Aunt Sue has a head full of stories.
> Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories.

The repetition underscores *who* is telling these stories (Aunt Sue) and *how many* of them there are (she's "full" of them). Because these lines are almost identical, the repetition also highlights the few words that *don't* repeat: "head" and "whole heart." The shift from "head" to "heart" suggests these stories aren't just something Aunt Sue thought up for entertainment; they're memories that live deep inside her.

Anaphora, epistrophe, and parallelism occur frequently throughout the rest of the poem. Take a look at lines 6-11:

> Black slaves
> Working in the hot sun,
> And black slaves
> Walking in the dewy night,
> And black slaves
> Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river

Using anaphora ("Black slaves"/"And black slaves") followed by parallel clauses, these lines create a strong rhythm that evokes both Aunt Sue's "flow[ing]" voice and the "sorrow songs" she's recalling. Lines 12 and 14 then consist of the identical phrase "Mingle themselves softly." This repetition underscores the fact that Aunt Sue is weaving many other stories into her own.

After the epistrophe in lines 1-2, the word "stories" appears again and again at the ends of lines (namely, lines 5, 16, 18, 19, and 25). By landing on this word repeatedly, the poem suggests the way storytelling links the past with the present and future. Aunt Sue is passing on her stories to the "child" (presumably her nephew), who is likely to continue this tradition. In the process, she's passing down important knowledge about her family and culture.

The poem features other kinds of repetition, too. Line 15, for example, contains polyptoton:

> In the dark shadows that cross and recross

This effect again suggests the way Aunt Sue's stories weave together the past and present. The "shadows that cross" her stories are the lives of people who are no longer around to relate their experiences. They "recross," perhaps, when they appear in more than one story. Her voice is like a net holding all these experiences together.

Finally, the poem contains a few widely spaced repetitions, such as "Summer nights"/"summer night" in lines 3 and 24, "Listening" in lines 17 and 25, and "brown-faced child"/"dark-faced child" in lines 4, 17, and 23. "Aunt Sue's" name also appears at least once in each stanza. These repetitions heighten the musicality of the language while fixing the poem's setting, action, and characters in the reader's mind.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Aunt Sue has a head full of stories. / Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories."
- **Line 3:** "Summer nights"
- **Line 4:** "Aunt Sue," "brown-faced child"
- **Line 5:** "stories."
- **Line 6:** "Black slaves"
- **Line 8:** "And black slaves"
- **Line 10:** "And black slaves"
- **Line 12:** "Mingle themselves softly"
- **Line 14:** "Mingle themselves softly"
- **Line 16:** "Aunt Sue's stories"
- **Line 17:** "dark-faced child," "listening"
- **Line 18:** "Aunt Sue's stories," "stories"
- **Line 19:** "stories"
- **Line 23:** "dark-faced child"
- **Line 24:** "summer night"
- **Line 25:** "Listening," "Aunt Sue's stories"

SIBILANCE

The poem contains a great deal of sibilance, which adds to its hushed and solemn tone. Some of this sibilance results from repetition, as in the first two lines:

> Aunt Sue has a head full of stories.
> Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories.

In these cases, sibilance accentuates the repetition, making the language sound even more rhythmic.

In lines 3-5, the smooth /s/ sounds help evoke the steady cadences of Aunt Sue's voice:

> Summer nights on the front porch
> Aunt Sue cuddles a brown-faced child to her bosom
> And tells him stories.

Sibilance becomes especially noticeable in the second half of the second stanza. In lines 10-11, the speaker describes Aunt Sue recalling "slaves / Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river." This burst of sibilance sounds both hushed and intense, evoking the depth of the enslaved people's grief and the power of turning their pain into memorable "songs."

In the following lines, the speaker adds that these "songs" now "Mingle themselves softly / In the flow of Aunt Sue's voice." Sibilance makes the lines themselves sound "soft," while giving them a smoother "flow" or cadence. Once again, it helps the poem take on the qualities of Aunt Sue's narration. This gentle sibilance also evokes the tender intimacy with which Aunt Sue

shares her stories.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Sue," "has," "stories"
- **Line 2:** "Sue," "has," "stories"
- **Line 3:** "Summer," "nights"
- **Line 4:** "Sue," "cuddles," "faced," "bosom"
- **Line 5:** "tells," "stories"
- **Line 6:** "slaves"
- **Line 7:** "sun"
- **Line 8:** "slaves"
- **Line 10:** "slaves"
- **Line 11:** "Singing," "sorrow," "songs," "banks"
- **Line 12:** "themselves," "softly"
- **Line 13:** "Sue's," "voice"
- **Line 14:** "themselves," "softly"
- **Line 15:** "shadows," "cross," "recross"
- **Line 16:** "Sue's," "stories"
- **Line 17:** "faced," "listening"
- **Line 18:** "Knows," "Sue's," "stories," "stories"
- **Line 19:** "knows," "Sue," "stories"
- **Line 23:** "faced"
- **Line 24:** "summer"
- **Line 25:** "Listening," "Sue's," "stories"

ALLITERATION

Like sibilance, alliteration adds rhythm, musicality, and emphasis to the poem. In lines 1-2, for example, /h/ alliteration emphasizes where Aunt Sue's stories come from:

> Aunt Sue **h**as a **h**ead full of stories.
> Aunt Sue **h**as a **w**hole **h**eart full of stories.

In other words, Aunt Sue's stories aren't coming from a book or folk tradition; they're memories she carries deep within. The staccato alliteration in "**w**hole **h**eart," especially, stresses how personal these stories are to her.

Next, there's a bit of /b/ alliteration in line 4:

> Aunt Sue cuddles a **b**rown-faced child to her **b**osom

Here, the shared consonant subtly reflects the bond between the child and his aunt, who are physically touching while she shares her stories. In turn, this bond suggests that Aunt Sue's storytelling comes from a place of love and generosity.

There's some subtler alliteration in the second stanza, too. The words "**W**orking" and "**W**alking" (which also share an /-ing/ suffix) appear at the beginning of lines 7 and 9, while "**m**ighty" in line 11 alliterates with "**M**ingle" in line 12. These musical effects evoke the lyrical "flow" of "Aunt Sue's voice" (line 13), as well as the "sorrow songs" that appear in her stories (line 11).

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "has," "head"
- **Line 2:** "whole," "heart"
- **Line 4:** "brown," "bosom"
- **Line 7:** "Working"
- **Line 9:** "Walking"
- **Line 11:** "mighty"
- **Line 12:** "Mingle"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment helps control the poem's pacing and rhythm, mimicking the effect of Aunt Sue's gripping "stories." It also draws attention to key words and images.

While the poem begins with end-stopped lines, it introduces enjambment near the end of the first stanza:

> Aunt Sue cuddles a brown-faced child to her **bosom**
> **And** tells him stories.

The line break after "bosom" highlights the image of Aunt Sue holding the "child" tenderly to her chest. Enjambment also adds force to the short, punctuated line ("And tells him stories.") directly following the longer, unpunctuated line. Like the poem's title, this shorter line emphasizes Aunt Sue's role as a storyteller, which is integral to her character.

Enjambments become more frequent in the second stanza. For example, Aunt Sue describes "Black slaves / Working in the hot sun," "black slaves / Walking in the dewy night," and "black slaves / Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river." In each of these cases, enjambment creates momentary suspense, as in a compelling story. The reader hurries from one line to the next in order to discover what Aunt Sue recalls about these harrowing times. The enjambments also create parallelism—a series of lines that break on the word "slaves" and are followed by an action word ("Working," "Walking," "Singing"). This parallel structure makes the language itself sound rhythmic and song-like.

In lines 10-13, consecutive enjambments send one line flowing easily into the next, echoing the steady "flow" of Aunt Sue's stories:

> And black **slaves**
> **Singing** sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty **river**
> **Mingle** themselves **softly**
> **In** the flow of old Aunt Sue's voice,

The free-flowing enjambment also evokes the "river" Aunt Sue is recalling, as well as the way stories can filter down from generation to generation, overcoming boundaries of time and space. This evocative effect continues in lines 14-16:

Mingle themselves softly
In the dark shadows that cross and recross
Aunt Sue's stories.

Just as the stories "Mingle [...] softly," combining Aunt Sue's memories with those of people she's known, the lines flow gently into one another via enjambment.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "bosom / And"
- **Lines 6-7:** "slaves / Working"
- **Lines 8-9:** "slaves / Walking"
- **Lines 10-11:** "slaves / Singing"
- **Lines 11-12:** "river / Mingle"
- **Lines 12-13:** "softly / In"
- **Lines 14-15:** "softly / In"
- **Lines 15-16:** "recross / Aunt"
- **Lines 19-20:** "stories / Out"
- **Lines 21-22:** "came / Right"
- **Lines 23-24:** "quiet / Of"

VOCABULARY

Bosom (Line 4) - Chest.

Dewy (Line 9) - Wet with condensation; damp.

Mingle (Line 12, Line 14) - Mix together.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem's 25 lines of free verse are split up into four stanzas of varying lengths. Rather than following a conventional form (such as a sonnet), the poem flows freely, changing its shape and rhythm as it goes along. Lines range in length from very short (such as line 6, which is only 2 syllables long) to quite long (line 11 is 14 syllables). The poem's free-flowing movement is evocative of Aunt Sue's own storytelling: she isn't reciting stories she found in a "book," but is simply sharing her own memories.

The poem uses a great deal of repetition, which echoes the passing down of stories from generation to generation. (Notice, for example, how the word "stories" itself recurs at the ends of lines 1, 2, 5, 16, 18, 19, and 25, and ends three of the four stanzas.) Hughes' free-flowing use of repetition and variation is also evocative of jazz music. (Jazz, the blues, and Black American music in general were major influences on Hughes's poetry; "Aunt Sue's Stories" appears in the collection he titled *The Weary Blues*). In this way, the poem draws on, and further honors the value of, Black cultural and artistic traditions.

METER

The poem is written in free verse, meaning that it doesn't use meter (or a rhyme scheme). Like many other English-language poets of the early 20th century, Hughes frequently varied or turned away from the strict poetic conventions of the past. Sometimes he altered traditional meters to sound more like jazz or blues rhythms; sometimes, as here, he sought to write verse that sounded more like the way people actually talk.

The poem's lack of meter also reflects the background and narrative style of its central character. Aunt Sue comes from a line of enslaved Black Americans who did not have access to traditional education, and whose stories therefore did not sound like stories from "book[s]." Instead, Aunt Sue shares her stories from the "heart," and the poem's loose, colloquial rhythms reflect that fact.

RHYME SCHEME

As a free verse poem, "Aunt Sue's Stories" doesn't follow a rhyme scheme. Whereas rhyme would have felt calculated and carefully wrought—like something out of a "book"—the poem's loose, conversational language reflects the heartfelt way Aunt Sue tells stories from "her own life." Instead of rhyme or meter, the poem relies on other sonic devices, such as repetition and alliteration, to create musicality and evoke the "songs" the poem hearkens back to.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker might be a detached third-person narrator, telling a story about members of their community. Alternatively, the speaker might be describing their *own* "Aunt Sue." They might even be a grown-up version of the "brown-faced child" who once sat listening to his aunt's stories. That is, the speaker may be looking back on his childhood and recalling time spent with his aunt. (The familiar way the speaker refers to "Aunt Sue" hints at a personal connection, but it's never clear that Sue is the *speaker's* aunt, as opposed to the aunt of a separate "child.")

Finally, the speaker might be a version of Hughes himself. Some critics have speculated that "Aunt Sue" is based on Hughes's grandmother Mary, a major influence in his early life. Whether or not the poem is directly autobiographical, Hughes unquestionably knew older Black people in his family and community who had lived through slavery and shared memories of that time with him.

SETTING

The poem takes place during the childhood of Aunt Sue's nephew (the "brown-faced child"), during "Summer nights" when he sits "on the front porch" with his aunt. These times are

portrayed as intimate and tender, as Aunt Sue "cuddles" him to her chest while she speaks.

The memories that Aunt Sue recalls, however, are from an earlier time: a time when she and other Black Americans were enslaved. (Presumably, this would have been before 1865, when the 13th Amendment formally abolished slavery in the U.S.) In this not-so-distant period, people like the speaker's aunt toiled beneath a "hot sun," and perhaps "Walk[ed]" to freedom under cover of "night." They also sang beside a "mighty river": most likely the Mississippi River, where Black people were often separated from loved ones by slavers who took them away to distant plantations.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Langston Hughes was one of the leading poets of a period of literary and artistic history known as the Harlem Renaissance. This period saw a flourishing of Black art, literature, and culture centered in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. At this time, prominent poets like Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer sought new ways of expressing Black experiences.

Hughes became known for his use of colloquial speech in his jazz- and blues-inspired or free verse poems, as well as his attempts to express a collective Black American experience. He admired Walt Whitman, who is sometimes known as the father of American free verse and who similarly tried to represent American experience on a grand scale. He was also moved by other poets, such as Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Carl Sandburg, who sought to incorporate the rhythms of ordinary life and work into their poetry.

"Aunt Sue's Stories" was published in Hughes' first book of poems, *The Weary Blues*, in 1926. The book immediately garnered praise and won several awards, the money from which allowed Hughes to complete his college education. He intended the poems to be performed with musical accompaniment in clubs around Harlem.

This poem, in particular, draws on Black oral traditions. Through centuries of American slavery, Black people passed on stories verbally, as most slaveholders barred them from learning to read or write. Some of these stories were set to music and sung out loud during work. For poets like Hughes, embracing the rhythms of this oral tradition was a way of keeping it alive even as Black American culture changed. Thus, "Aunt Sue's Stories" embraces and honors Black history and tradition.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Langston Hughes was born in 1901, only 36 years after slavery was abolished in the United States. Hughes felt the legacy of slavery keenly; both of his paternal great-grandmothers had been enslaved, while both of his paternal great-grandfathers had been slaveholders. His father left the family when Hughes was just a baby, traveling outside the U.S. in search of a life not hemmed in by persistent racism. Meanwhile, Hughes's mother spent most of his childhood traveling in search of work.

As a result, Hughes was primarily raised by his maternal grandmother, Mary Patterson Langston. Mary Langston is often considered to be the inspiration for "Aunt Sue's Stories," as, like "Aunt Sue," she passed down stories about her family history and American racism to young Hughes. She taught Hughes to take pride in his heritage and see the value in Black people's "real stories," which had been sidelined and neglected by white writers.

Hughes never lost the sense of duty his grandmother instilled in him. In his poems, ordinary Black people saw and heard their own lives reflected back to them. In this way, Hughes' work was always in service of uplifting and honoring Black people, as well as crafting authentic portraits of American society.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Read About Hughes' First Poetry Collection — An overview of The Weary Blues, the collection in which "Aunt Sue's Stories" was originally published, via the Academy of American Poets. (https://poets.org/book/weary-blues)
- More About the Poet — A Poetry Foundation biography of Langston Hughes. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/langston-hughes)
- An Introduction to the Harlem Renaissance — Read about the literary movement of which Hughes was a part. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/145704/an-introduction-to-the-harlem-renaissance)
- An Introduction to Jazz Poetry — Read about a specific kind of poetry Hughes helped establish. (https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-jazz-poetry)
- The Public vs. Private Hughes — Read an article by writer and critic Hilton Als about Hughes's careful public persona and the complex, real person behind the poems. (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/23/sojourner)
- Listen to the Poet Read — A recording of Hughes reading several of his poems, including "Aunt Sue's Stories." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07aT-Z3cdEk)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LANGSTON HUGHES POEMS

- As I Grew Older
- Cross
- Daybreak in Alabama
- Democracy
- Dreams
- Dream Variations
- Harlem
- Homecoming
- I, Too
- Let America Be America Again
- Mother to Son
- Night Funeral in Harlem
- The Ballad of the Landlord
- Theme for English B
- The Negro Speaks of Rivers
- The Weary Blues

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Mottram, Darla. "*Aunt Sue's Stories.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 18 Aug 2022. Web. 8 Sep 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mottram, Darla. "*Aunt Sue's Stories.*" LitCharts LLC, August 18, 2022. Retrieved September 8, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/langston-hughes/aunt-sue-s-stories.