Cross

POEM TEXT

1   My old man's a white old man
2   And my old mother's black.
3   If ever I cursed my white old man
4   I take my curses back.

5   If ever I cursed my black old mother
6   And wished she were in hell,
7   I'm sorry for that evil wish
8   And now I wish her well.

9   My old man died in a fine big house.
10 My ma died in a shack.
11 I wonder where I'm gonna die,
12 Being neither white nor black?

SUMMARY

The speaker, who was born to a white father and a Black mother, says that if they've said bad things about their white father in the past, they regret it.

If the speaker ever said bad, damning things about their Black mother, the speaker regrets having said those things and now thinks of her kindly.

The speaker's father died in a large, nice home. The speaker's mother died in a small, run-down house. The speaker wonders what kind of circumstances they'll die in, being biracial.

THEMES

RACISM AND BIRACIAL IDENTITY

"Cross" reflects on the complexities of being a mixed-race person in a racist world. The speaker, who was born to a white father and a Black mother, admits to feeling anger in the past toward both parents—anger that stemmed from the difficulty of being biracial. Now, the speaker retracts that anger, understanding that the racism the speaker has faced isn't their family's fault. "Being neither white nor black," the speaker is painfully aware that they fit neither into their father's nor their mother's world; there's no real place for them in a racially prejudiced society. Racism, the poem suggests, makes life difficult and uncertain for people who don't fit into a

clear (and ultimately reductive) racial category.

The speaker's anger with their parents reflects the pressures of being biracial in a society that discriminates based on strict racial categories. In such a society, the poem implies, this speaker must have had trouble fitting in *anywhere;* race would have been a constant source of tension and confusion.

Not being able to claim a fully white or Black identity once made the speaker mad at their parents: the speaker's life has been difficult simply because the couple had a child! But the speaker also "take[s] my curses back" and is "sorry" for their past "evil wish[es]"—perhaps because the speaker now understands that their parents must have struggled with racist pressures themselves. The speaker notes that the couple even died in separate houses, a hint that they either split up or were never really allowed to be together. Once again, these details point to the pain and difficulty of multiracial relationships in a racist world.

Having seen how the world treated their parents differently, the speaker is left questioning how a biracial person can possibly fit into a racist society. The speaker's father "died in a fine big house," while the speaker's mother "died in a shack." These facts emphasize the dramatic inequality between white and Black people in the speaker's world, but they also underscore how being white *or* Black, but not both, determines one's fate.

Unlike the parents, the speaker is "neither white nor black," which means the speaker's future is deeply uncertain. The speaker could end up like the "old man" and die in a big house, or like the "ma" and die in "a shack"—or somewhere in between! Clearly, this uncertainty is a lingering source of discomfort and difficulty for the speaker.

Despite making peace with both parents and with the past, the speaker can't make absolute peace with being biracial because of the constant uncertainty it creates. By portraying one biracial person's struggle, the poem critiques a cruelly reductive and racist society that can only see in black and white.

> **Where this theme appears in the poem:**
> - Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

My old man's a white old man
And my old mother's black.

"Cross" begins with a simple statement about the race of the speaker's parents. Right off the bat, one meaning of the poem's title becomes clear: the speaker is a "cross" between a white man and a Black woman.

The poem's immediate focus on the speaker's biracial identity places the subject of race front and center. But while these first two lines communicate the races of the speaker's parents (and by extension, the race of the speaker), they don't tell readers much else. Where and when does the poem take place, readers might wonder, and what's the speaker's gender? What kind of relationship does the speaker have with their parents? For now, these things are unclear. This suggests just how important race is in the speaker's world: it apparently supersedes other considerations.

By focusing so exclusively on race, the speaker also sets up a stark contrast, or [juxtaposition](link), between their white father and Black mother. The parents are not only different races but are also discussed in separate lines of the poem. This separation on the page subtly emphasizes their different experiences. In fact, the only things connecting them are the adjective "old," which the speaker uses to describe them both, and the fact that both of them are responsible for the speaker's existence. The difference—and distance—between the speaker's parents will be important later in the poem, when the speaker thinks about the dramatic inequality between white and Black people in this society.

Finally, let's examine the [meter](link) of these lines:

> My | old man's | a white | old man
> And my | old moth- | er's black.

The first line contains a single **stressed** syllable ("My"), The second line has just three iambs, so it contains one less stressed syllable than the first line.

This looks a lot like [common meter](link), a pattern of alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. [Iambs](link) are metrical feet that follow an unstressed-**stressed** syllable pattern; iambic tetrameter means there are four of these feet per line, while trimeter means there are three.

Common meter is often used for a special type of stanza called the [ballad](link) stanza (spoiler alert: the three stanzas of "Cross" are all ballad stanzas!). The alternation between four- and three-beat lines creates a highly musical sound that's good for both telling long stories and conveying intense emotion in short lyrics, such as "Cross."

Of course, these lines don't fit common meter perfectly: line 1 is missing a beat, and it's possible to read extra stresses onto "old" in each line. These lines are a good example of the way Langston Hughes subtly experimented with traditional form and meter in order to make his poems—"Cross" included—more musical and expressive.

LINES 3-4

> If ever I cursed my white old man
> I take my curses back.

Having established the race of their parents (and by extension, their own biracial identity), the speaker admits to having felt anger toward their father in the past. In the present, however, the speaker expresses regret for having "cursed my white old man," saying that "I take my curses back." Though the speaker doesn't specifically say why they were angry with their father, their desire to make amends for the past seems genuine, tender, and heartfelt.

The fact that the speaker is talking in this mature way about the past also indicates that the speaker may be a little older. Whether that means 24 (the age Langston Hughes was when he wrote the poem) or 64 is hard to say, but it's clear that the speaker has had some time to think about and work through the anger they once felt.

Readers may ask: why would the speaker curse their father to begin with, and why is that anything special? Isn't it common for children to get angry at their parents from time to time?

That's true enough, but the anger the speaker expresses seems to be more than just adolescent frustration. Based on the poem's focus on race, this anger likely stemmed from the confusion and uncertainty that being biracial caused in the speaker's life. It's understandable, in a way, that the speaker may have blamed their parents for the pain they experienced. Now that the speaker's a little older, though, they seem to realize the unfairness or pointlessness of being "cross" with their parents (as opposed to, say, being angry at society itself).

Like the first two lines, lines 3 and 4 approximately follow [common meter](link). Also notice how lines 2 and 4 share an [end rhyme](link) ("black" and "back"). In this first stanza, lines 1 and 3 also happen to share an identical rhyme, because "man" (or the phrase "white old man") is repeated exactly. This identical rhyme isn't a typical part of the [ballad](link) stanza, which normally follows an ABCB [rhyme scheme](link), but it doesn't totally throw the rhyme scheme off, either.

LINES 5-8

> If ever I cursed my black old mother
> And wished she were in hell,
> I'm sorry for that evil wish
> And now I wish her well.

While the first stanza mostly talked about the speaker's father, the second stanza turns to the speaker's "black old mother." Again, the speaker expresses regret for any anger they felt toward their parent in the past.

Notice how the speaker uses the same phrasing to express their feelings: "If ever I cursed my black old mother" mirrors "If ever I cursed my white old man" (line 3). This [parallelism](link) closely connects the speaker's mother and father, even though the

poem separates them into different lines and stanzas (and life, as it turns out, condemned them to wildly different fates). The speaker's forgiveness of both parents strikes a tender, sincere note.

By repeatedly emphasizing race, the poem begins to subtly indicate *why* the speaker may have felt anger toward (or been "cross" with) their parents. The speaker, it seems, once resented their parents for having a biracial child in a racist world, and blamed their parents for the challenges and uncertainty they've faced in that world. They resented having to bear the "cross" of being biracial, and that resentment extended to their parents.

Now, however, the speaker seems eager to forgive (though after both parents have died). They now "wish [their mother] well" rather than wishing her "in hell," suggesting that their moral *judgment* of their mother has changed. So has their judgment of themselves: they consider their own past anger "evil." The speaker may realize that this anger was misplaced; instead of directing it toward the people who brought them into a racist world, they should have directed it toward the racism itself.

Like the first stanza, this is a [ballad](link) stanza: it rhymes ABCB and follows [common meter](link). Listen to the rhythm of lines 7 and 8:

> I'm sor- | ry for | that ev- | il wish
> And now | I wish | her well.

Line 7 has four metrical feet, while line 8 only has three. In both lines, the feet are [iambs](link): they follow an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern. Alternation between lines of four and three iambs is the hallmark of common meter, and it creates the simple yet memorable music of "Cross."

LINES 9-10

> My old man died in a fine big house.
> My ma died in a shack.

The first two lines of this stanza echo the first two lines of the poem. Just as lines 1-2 contrasted the racial identities of the speaker's parents, these lines contrast them based on where they died.

The speaker's white father died "in a fine big house," while the speaker's Black mother died "in a shack." It's a stark [juxtaposition](link), and while the speaker uses seemingly straightforward language, there's a lot of emotion packed into these lines.

The [alliterative](link) phrases "My old man" and "My ma" convey the affection the speaker feels for both parents—affection that can only add to the speaker's sadness about the inequality their parents faced in life and death.

Again, the distance between the parents stems directly from their race. The "old man," who is white, died in a fancy house

(and probably lived a life of luxury); the speaker's "ma," who is Black, died (and probably lived) in humble or desperate conditions. It's even possible, though by no means certain, that the speaker's father was a slave owner and their mother enslaved. But an interracial relationship during the post-Civil War period (late 1800s or early 1900s), when interracial marriages remained legally forbidden and many Black Americans faced extreme poverty and oppression, is at least as likely.

In any case, the poem is clearly set in a society that advantages some people and disadvantages others just because of their race—even when those people have had a child together. Indeed, it appears that the speaker's white father and Black mother were unable to live together (at the very least, they did not die together) because of society's disapproval of interracial relationships. The poem shines a light on the moral emptiness of such a society and conveys the dignity of all people, regardless of skin color.

LINES 11-12

> I wonder where I'm gonna die,
> Being neither white nor black?

It's not just larger social inequalities that motivate the speaker to reflect on race and express forgiveness toward their parents. These last two lines, which form a [rhetorical question](link), shift from the speaker's past anger to the speaker's present uncertainty about their future in a racist society. They show an understanding that society, not their parents, is to blame for the strife and confusion they've experienced as a biracial person—clearly, they continue to experience those things even now that their parents have died. Thus, this final question is both a biting social critique and an expression of real uncertainty.

In these lines, the speaker fully embraces the ambiguous position of being "neither white nor black," while suggesting how difficult it is to be in that position. The question of "where I'm gonna die" stands in for the larger question of what the speaker's ultimate social and economic fate will be. Will they have the opportunity to advance to their father's level of comfort and success, or be stuck in poverty as their mother was? Since they belong to "neither" one category "nor" another, will they ever find a sense of community? Being biracial in a world that doesn't understand or approve of this identity is a "cross" the speaker has had to bear—and, it seems, will bear for the rest of their life.

These lines gain force from the [alliteration](link) of "wonder where" and "white," as well as the [chiastic](link), or "crossed," alliteration of "Being neither" and "nor black." As in the rest of the poem, the language is plainspoken and restrained even as the verse remains musically expressive. The result is a sharp critique of the society that has made the speaker's question—and the poem—necessary.

✖ POETIC DEVICES

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The last two lines of "Cross" form a rhetorical question that reflects the speaker's uncertainty as a biracial person. "Being neither white nor black," the speaker is unsure what their life holds in store. Will the speaker die "in a fine big house," like their white father; "in a shack," like their Black mother; or some place in between? In other words, what will be their ultimate social fate in this racist society? Will they ever find success and a sense of belonging, or will they feel like an outsider forever?

The question is especially powerful because it ends the poem. It memorably critiques a society in which people are assigned to unequal, and uncertain, fates simply because of their race.

> **Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:**
> - **Lines 11-12:** "I wonder where I'm gonna die, / Being neither white nor black?"

JUXTAPOSITION

"Cross" is a poem of sharp contrasts, or juxtapositions, especially between the speaker's white father and Black mother. From the first two lines, the stark racial divide between the father and mother is expressed in straightforward, clear language:

> My old man's a white old man
> And my old mother's black.

The parallelism in these lines (especially that repetition of "old) makes the juxtaposition all the more striking. The speaker's parents are alike in that they're, well, the speaker's parents, and in that they're both "old." And yet, their differing races create a sharp divide between them in the speaker's society.

Later in the poem, it becomes clear that race isn't the only contrast between the speaker's parents—they also seem to have led radically different lives, at least toward the end. While the father died "in a fine big house," the mother died "in a shack." The glaring contrast between these two fates underscores the racial inequality of the speaker's society.

Most of all, the clear divisions between the speaker's parents highlight the uncertainty of the speaker's position as a biracial person. By living in the ambiguous space between "white[ness]" and "black[ness]," the speaker faces a fate that is anything but certain.

> **Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:**
> - **Lines 1-2:** "My old man's a white old man / And my old mother's black."

> - **Lines 9-10:** "My old man died in a fine big house. / My ma died in a shack."

REPETITION

"Cross" is full of repetition: "white," "black," "old man," and "old mother" are just a few of the important words and phrases the speaker uses several times throughout the poem. Such repetition emphasizes the importance of these words to the speaker, who's clearly spent much of their life thinking about the complexities of race and the challenges of being born to parents of different races. The repetition of "died"/"died"/"die" suggests that the speaker also has death on their mind: perhaps they're still grieving for their parents, or perhaps they've reached an age when they're seriously contemplating their own mortality.

There are two special types of repetition in "Cross." One of them, called diacope, happens in the very first line, where "old man" is repeated after just two intervening words. Diacope adds to the musical quality of the line, and it also seems to indicate the affection the speaker feels toward their "white old man," despite the anger they may have felt toward him in the past.

The second type of special repetition, called polyptoton, happens with words like "cursed" and "curses," "wished" and "wish," and "died" and "die." Like diacope, polyptoton contributes to the musical, almost song-like quality of the poem. (Repetition with variations can be found in many musical pieces as well.) This quality heightens the poem's emotional intensity, helping to convey the speaker's affection for their parents and their anxious uncertainty about their own fate.

> **Where Repetition appears in the poem:**
> - **Line 1:** "old man's," "white ," "old man"
> - **Line 2:** "old mother's," " black"
> - **Line 3:** "cursed," "white old man"
> - **Line 4:** "curses"
> - **Line 5:** "cursed"
> - **Line 6:** "wished"
> - **Line 7:** "wish"
> - **Line 8:** "wish"
> - **Line 9:** "old man," " died"
> - **Line 10:** "died"
> - **Line 11:** "die"
> - **Line 12:** "white," "black"

PARALLELISM

The speaker of "Cross" uses parallelism to emphasize their regret at having been angry with their parents. "If ever I cursed my white old man," the speaker says—and then, just two lines later, "If ever I cursed my black old mother." By phrasing these

statements in parallel, the speaker unites their father and mother, at least within the space of the poem. Strengthening the connection between the parents helps the speaker communicate the depth of their feelings toward them.

However, parallelism also helps to highlight the *distance* between the father and the mother. After stating that "[m]y old man died in a fine big house," the speaker reveals that "[m]y ma died in a shack." These statements seem straightforward, but the parallel phrasing poignantly emphasizes the sharp contrast between the parents' fates. That juxtaposition, in turn, intensifies the uncertainty the speaker feels as a result of "Being neither white nor black."

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My old man's"
- **Line 2:** "my old mother's"
- **Line 3:** "If ever I cursed my white old man"
- **Line 5:** "If ever I cursed my black old mother"
- **Lines 9-10:** "My old man died in a fine big house. / My ma died in a shack."

ALLITERATION

There are several instances of alliteration in "Cross." Most of these occur as consonant pairs: "**M**y old **m**an's," "**m**y old **m**other's," "**w**ish her **w**ell," "[m]y **m**a." These tight alliterative pairs add a subtle layer of musicality and emotion to the poem's otherwise simple, straightforward language.

Along with the repetition of "old," the repeated /m/ sounds of "[**m**]y old **m**an" and "**m**y old **m**other" sound pleasant and affectionate. They help suggest that the speaker has dropped their resentment toward their parents—who were themselves victims of racial prejudice—and begun to think and speak of them fondly. In fact, nearly all of the poem's alliteration involves soft /m/ and /w/ sounds that reflect the softening of the speaker's attitude. (The repetition of "cursed"/"curses"/"cursed," which is more polyptoton than alliteration, injects a rare harshness into the poem's music—fittingly enough, since "curses" are harsh language.)

An especially poignant alliteration occurs in the last line of the poem. The /b/ and /n/ sounds in "**B**eing **n**either" and "**n**or **b**lack" are also a kind of chiasmus; in other words, they form a sort of sonic "cross"—appropriately enough, given the poem's title. These alliterative sounds lend extra weight to the speaker's rhetorical question, which reflects the profound uncertainty of being multiracial in a black-and-white world.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My," "man's"
- **Line 2:** "my," "mother's"
- **Line 3:** "my," "man"

- **Line 5:** "my," "mother"
- **Line 6:** "wished," "were"
- **Line 7:** "wish"
- **Line 8:** "wish," "well."
- **Line 9:** "My," "man"
- **Line 10:** "My ma"
- **Line 11:** "wonder where"
- **Line 12:** "Being," " neither," "nor ," "black"

CONSONANCE

Along with alliteration, consonance contributes to the poem's musical qualities and helps communicate the speaker's emotions—often in subtle ways. A few good examples are the harsh /k/ sounds in lines 4-5:

> I ta**k**e my **c**urses ba**ck**.
> If ever I **c**ursed my bla**ck** old mother

These sharp sounds are themselves suggestive of "curses," or harsh language.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My," "man's," "man"
- **Line 2:** "my," "mother's," "black"
- **Line 3:** "my," "man"
- **Line 4:** "take," "curses ," "back"
- **Line 5:** "cursed," "black old ," "mother"
- **Line 6:** "wished," "were," "hell"
- **Line 7:** "sorry," "evil," "wish"
- **Line 8:** "now," "wish," "well"
- **Line 9:** "My," "man," "fine"
- **Line 10:** "My ma"
- **Line 11:** "wonder," "where," "gonna"
- **Line 12:** "Being," "neither," "nor," "black"

PUN

The poem's title, "Cross," is a pun with three meanings. Most obviously, it refers to the speaker's identity as a biracial person, or a "cross" between two races.

"Cross" can also mean "angry" (as in, "I was cross at him"). In the poem, the speaker admits to having been angry, or cross, with their father and mother—though, by the end of the poem, it seems clear that their anger is now directed toward society.

The third meaning of "cross" is largely symbolic: living as a biracial person in a racist society is the speaker's burden, or "cross to bear." The poem offers a strong critique of the prejudiced society that makes being biracial burdensome at all.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

📋 VOCABULARY

Old Man (Line 1, Line 3, Line 9) - The speaker's father.

Cursed/Curses (Line 3, Line 4, Line 5) - To "curse" someone means to use an offensive word or phrase toward them, or to wish them harm. "Curses," in turn, are those offensive words or ill wishes.

Shack (Line 10) - A small, often run-down house.

🕐 FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Cross" contains 12 lines divided into three four-line stanzas, a.k.a. quatrains. These stanzas belong to a special category called the ballad stanza, because they loosely follow a type of meter called common meter and use an ABCB rhyme scheme.

Though the ballad stanza is often used for long poems that tell an exciting story, it can also be used for shorter, more lyric poems, like "Cross." It's often associated with poetry that's meant to be sung or set to music, so it's not surprising that it appealed to Hughes, whose poetry was famously influenced by blues, jazz, and other popular music. ("Cross" originally appeared in Hughes's collection *The Weary Blues*.)

In a basic sense, the poem's three stanzas reflect the "Cross" of the title. The first stanza is about the speaker's white father, the second stanza is about the speaker's Black mother, and the third stanza is about the uncertainty the speaker feels as a biracial "cross" between the two.

METER

"Cross" contains three ballad stanzas, which follow an ABCB rhyme scheme and a special meter known as common meter.

In common meter, the lines alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. These two types of meter are named this way because their basic foot is the iamb (a unit consisting of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable). Tetrameter has four feet per line (da-**dum** da-**dum** da-**dum** da-**dum**), while trimeter has three (da-**dum** da-**dum** da-**dum**).

In general, then, the first and third lines of each stanza contain four strong beats, or stressed syllables, while the second and fourth lines (which share an end rhyme) contain three. Let's see how all of this works in the poem by taking a closer look at the first stanza:

> My | old **man's** | a **white** | old **man**
> And **my** | old **moth-** | er's **black.**
> If **ev-** | er I **cursed** | my **white** | old **man**
> I **take** | my **curs-** | es **back.**

Notice how lines 1 and 3 have four stresses, while lines 2 and 4

have three. This stanza is an almost perfect example of common meter: a line of iambic tetrameter followed by a line of iambic trimeter—then rinse and repeat! But wait: why *almost* perfect? Line 1 is what's sometimes called a headless, or acephalous, line. It gets this funny name because the first iamb (unstressed-**stressed**) is missing its first unstressed syllable, leaving a single, lonely stress at the beginning of the line. The resulting line seems like a part of it has been cut off—in other words, it's "headless."

There's another small variation to the meter in this stanza. Look at line 3, where the second foot has three syllables (unstressed-unstressed-**stressed**) instead of the usual two. This foot is called an anapest, and poets will sometimes switch it in for an iamb to add a little rhythmic spice. Headless lines and anapestic substitutions are just two of the many ways poets vary common meter. The metrical flexibility of "Cross" makes the poem more musical, expressive, and true to the rhythms of everyday speech.

While the first two stanzas follow a more or less regular meter, the last stanza gets a little more ambiguous. Notice how line 9, for example, could sound like this:

> My **old** | man **died** | in a **fine** | big **house.**

Or like this:

> My **old** | man **died** | in a **fine** | **big** **house.**

There are multiple ways to hear the meter of this line, and none of them is necessarily the "right" way. Unlike a line of strict iambic tetrameter, it's a loose, complex line that offers different rhythmic possibilities. This rhythmic spark and sizzle is characteristic of Hughes, who often attempted to incorporate the rhythms of jazz, ragtime, and the blues into those of traditional European poetry. This stanza's metrical ambiguities also reflect the speaker's uncertainty about the future.

RHYME SCHEME

"Cross" consists of three ballad stanzas, which typically follow an ABCB rhyme scheme. In other words, the second and fourth lines of ballad stanzas share an end rhyme, as they do here. The poem's overall rhyme scheme looks like this:

> ABAB CDED FBHB

Note that the first stanza technically diverges from the usual scheme of the ballad stanza. The first and third lines, which usually don't rhyme, share an identical rhyme: "man." In fact, the entire phrase "white old man" repeats at the ends of these lines. While this feature is a little unusual, it doesn't throw the scheme off. The repetition of "white old man" simply emphasizes the racial identity of the speaker's father, which has been a source of anger for the speaker in the past and continues to be a cause of uncertainty in the present.

One other interesting thing to note about the poem's rhyme scheme is that the first stanza's B rhyme sound ("black" and "back") reappears in the third stanza ("shack" and "black"). Again, this feature is a little unusual, but it gives the poem a sense of symmetry and contributes to its musical quality. It's also a good example of Hughes's experimentation with traditional poetic forms, which was a hallmark of his style. Finally, the repetition of "black," much like the repetition of "white old man" in the first stanza, emphasizes the race of the speaker's mother and foregrounds the importance of race in the poem.

💬 SPEAKER

The speaker of "Cross" is only specifically identified by race: they're biracial, born to a white father and Black mother. Though the speaker isn't Langston Hughes himself, it's worth noting that Hughes, like many Black Americans, was multiracial, so his own experiences almost certainly informed the poem. Hughes personally knew the confusion and uncertainty of being "mixed-race" in a highly prejudiced society.

The speaker is a biracial person of unspecified gender and age, who previously resented both parents but has now forgiven them. Both parents have died, and death is on the speaker's mind. These details seem to indicate a speaker who has reached adulthood, and perhaps middle or old age.

It's possible, though not certain, that the speaker's mother was enslaved. During the centuries of slavery in America, it wasn't uncommon for white male slave owners to have children with their Black slaves; in fact, this was the case with two sets of Hughes's own great-grandparents. Whatever the identity of the speaker's parents, it's clear that the speaker used to feel anger toward them, as simply being biracial in a prejudiced world has created difficulty and uncertainty in the speaker's life. Now the speaker expresses regret for that anger, even as the difficulty and uncertainty linger.

🌄 SETTING

The setting of "Cross" is unspecified. Hughes wrote the poem in the 1920s in Harlem, the predominantly Black neighborhood of New York City, but it's unclear whether the poem takes place there. Historically speaking, the poem was composed well before the mid-20th-century Civil Rights Movement, during a period when Black Americans faced immense prejudice from society at large. Being biracial in America at that time—when Black and white people were strictly segregated and interracial marriage was outlawed—posed special difficulties, as it does for the poem's speaker.

However, the poem could also apply to other times and places, including earlier eras. It's possible that the speaker is the child

of a slave-owning white man and an enslaved Black woman; this contrast may be suggested by the fact that the father died in a "fine big house," while the mother died in a mere "shack." Alternatively, these details might simply indicate that the two parents couldn't live together under their society's rules, and that the wealthy father either couldn't or wouldn't support the mother of his child.

Whatever the time and place of the poem, it's clear that the speaker lives in a deeply racist and unequal society, one that's especially hard for biracial people to navigate with certainty.

ⓘ CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Cross" was published in 1926 in Langston Hughes's debut poetry collection, *The Weary Blues*. Hughes was only 24 years old at the time, but the book marked the arrival of a major new voice in American letters. In poems such as "Cross," "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," and "I, Too," Hughes celebrated the richness and beauty of Black American experience while critiquing the profound racism and inequality of American society.

With the book's publication, Hughes became a central figure in the growing literary, artistic, and cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. This movement was centered in Harlem, a predominantly Black neighborhood in New York City, and flourished during the 1920s and 1930s.

Along with writers such as Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, and James Weldon Johnson, Hughes brought unprecedented national and international attention to the rich variety of Black American life and art. At a time when many European and white American poets (including Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot) were writing highly allusive, difficult poems, the writers of the Harlem Renaissance gave readers an elegant, accessible look into the everyday experience of Black Americans.

Hughes's poems combined powerful lyricism and plain language, reflecting the realities of his city and country in a sophisticated yet popular manner. Hughes was strongly influenced by the musical scene in Harlem, and he was one of the innovators of Jazz Poetry, which sought to infuse poems with the rhythms of jazz, ragtime, and the blues. Hughes may even have expected many of the poems in *The Weary Blues*, including "Cross," to be sung with musical accompaniment in the Harlem nightclubs of the time. The poem exemplifies the deep engagement and experimentation with form and tradition that marked all of Hughes's work.

Among his most important influences, Hughes named Walt Whitman, Carl Sandburg, and Paul Laurence Dunbar, one of the first Black American poets to gain a national reputation. His innovations in poetic sound and form, his memorable

evocations of Black life, and his searching reflections on race in America continue to influence poets around the world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When "Cross" was published in 1926, America was a highly segregated country, and racial prejudice was (as it still is) a defining aspect of society. Though the Civil War had ended slavery and Black Americans were guaranteed certain civil rights by the 14th and 15th amendments, Jim Crow laws fiercely enforced segregation and inequality in many states. Interracial marriage was prohibited by law, and romance across racial lines was widely frowned upon; it wasn't until 1967 (the year of Hughes's death) that the Supreme Court, in Loving v. Virginia, declared interracial marriage legal across the country.

Due in part to the dramatic segregation in Southern states in the decades after the Civil War, many Black Americans left the South for the North in the early part of the 20th century. This mass movement became known as the Great Migration, and it produced concentrated hubs of Black life in many northern cities.

The most prominent of these was Harlem, which became the heart of Black American culture in New York City and the nation as a whole. In the 1920s, when Hughes first lived and worked there, Harlem was a thriving cultural center, with a rich nightlife, music scene (dominated by ragtime, jazz, and the blues), and literary community. Black Americans owned and operated successful businesses, and the neighborhood gave rise to economic growth, social progress, and artistic experimentation.

All of these conditions created the ideal environment for the Harlem Renaissance. Nevertheless, American society at large, including New York City itself, remained starkly divided along racial lines, and the kind of prejudice and uncertainty faced by the speaker of "Cross" remained common. The writers of the movement thus depicted and criticized the racism of their society—as Hughes does in "Cross"—even as they celebrated the beauty of Black life.

📚 MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of "Cross." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73ULDls-X8g)

- What Is Jazz Poetry? — An introduction to Jazz Poetry, a writing style Hughes played an important part in creating. (https://poets.org/text/brief-guide-jazz-poetry)

- Hughes's Life and Work — A short biography of Hughes from the Academy of American Poets. (https://poets.org/poet/langston-hughes)

- What Was the Harlem Renaissance? — An immersive introduction to the Harlem Renaissance, the literary movement Hughes helped to shape. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/145704/an-introduction-to-the-harlem-renaissance)

- The Poet's Voice — Langston Hughes reads three of his poems. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwRF7mU4zrg)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LANGSTON HUGHES POEMS

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

💬 HOW TO CITE

MLA

Martin, Kenneth. "*Cross.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 9 Jun 2021. Web. 29 Jul 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Martin, Kenneth. "*Cross.*" LitCharts LLC, June 9, 2021. Retrieved July 29, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/langston-hughes/cross.