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Poetry of a  
World Divided

2009-10

SEASON THEME:

**A World Divided**



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# Poetry Resource

2009-2010: A World Divided

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# Preface

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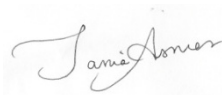
**What do a wounded midwife, impudent heathens, microscopes, stones, eating in the kitchen, and ancient Persian palaces have in common?** These seemingly unrelated things help illustrate division—and unity—in the poems you are about to read and research.

If you were to guess that these poems are all very different, you'd be right. "We Shall Bring Forth New Life" takes place in a world that is literally shattered: Hiroshima after the atomic bomb. "We and They" playfully exposes the basic prejudices behind imperialism. "I, Too, Sing America" resolves to overcome racism in the segregated United States. "Lament for Seville" takes you back to the slowly fracturing world of Al-Andalus—and should echo for you Kay's world of Al-Rassan. "Conversation with a Stone" is about the barriers that literally divide us—and "Microscopes are prudent..." muses on the division between faith and science.

Yet these poets who lived worlds and ages apart managed to write about the same basic concepts. Spread their poems out on a table and they quietly form a dialogue about the tension between separation and togetherness.

When we say "dialogue," though, we don't mean "agreement." Our poets addressed the same concepts, but they would have disagreed on crucial points. Imagine Kipling, who coined the phrase "white man's burden"—meaning Britain's obligation to civilize the non-white world—facing off against Langston Hughes, an advocate for African-American rights. Picture 13<sup>th</sup>-century poet al-Rundi, witness to the slow destruction of Al-Andalus, trying to comprehend the instant nuclear obliteration of a Japanese city.

Getting these poets to actually converse, were such a thing possible, would make for one awkward dinner party. Still, there is one thing all of our poets would agree upon: division and unification, especially in regards to people or worlds, is never simple. Whether we choose to accept division, strive against all odds for unity, or merely bask in the complexities of these issues, we will be sure to meet others with different points of view<sup>1</sup>—who might even inspire us to change our own.



Tania Asnes

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<sup>1</sup> Especially at, say, Concordia International School in Shanghai circa June, 2010.



# I. Sadako Kurihara: "We Shall Bring Forth New Life"

**In the wake of destruction, new life begins.** After their city's nuclear obliteration, the surviving citizens of Hiroshima rebuilt their lives and their society. The bombing of Hiroshima also inspired new art, including the poetry of a then-obscure shopkeeper, prompted to write by the horror and hope she witnessed coexisting in the aftermath of the disaster. Her poetry is a testament to the strength of the human spirit and the emotional power of words.

## Objectives

By the time you complete this chapter, you should be able to answer the following questions.

- What inspired Sadako Kurihara to write poetry?
- What were the main influences on Sadako Kurihara's work?
- How do Japanese poetic forms differ from English poetic forms?
- How does Sadako Kurihara use poetic devices to convey her intent in "We Shall Bring Forth New Life"?
- What is Sadako Kurihara's message regarding human resiliency<sup>2</sup> in "We Shall Bring Forth New Life"?

## Sadako Kurihara

Sadako Kurihara was born in 1913 in the Doi Sadako neighborhood of Hiroshima,<sup>3</sup> a city in the south of Japan's largest island, Honshu. The younger of two daughters, Kurihara started writing at the age of thirteen. In 1930, she graduated from the Kobe women's high school and published her first poems in a Hiroshima newspaper. After graduation, Kurihara settled in the Hiroshima area and, in 1931, she married a man named Tadaichi Kurihara.<sup>4</sup> She became a shopkeeper and mother of three children, and she might well have continued with that life were it not for the events of August 6, 1945.

Kurihara and her family lived four kilometers from the spot on which the United States dropped the first atomic bomb ever used in warfare. The explosion created a mushroom cloud visible from over 100 miles away and a resulted in a five-year death toll of



Image credit: <http://www.hiroshimapeacemedia.io>

<sup>2</sup> Resiliency means strength and the ability to recover quickly.

<sup>3</sup> This worked out well for Sadako Kurihara, but imagine what it would have been like if your parents had named you after your neighborhood.

<sup>4</sup> He was an anarchist. Unsurprisingly, Kurihara's parents were not thrilled with her choice of mate.



roughly 200,000 people—not just from the blast itself, but from radiation sickness and cancer.

The bomb was the culmination of the **Manhattan Project**, the United States' secret endeavor to build a practical nuclear weapon for use in World War II. Though the bomb was conceived to stop Germany, the war in Europe had effectively ended by the time it was ready for use. The war in Asia was far more pressing.

Opinions vary widely on whether using the bomb was justifiable at the time, but the effects of the explosion—both immediate and long-term—were undeniably devastating. The shock wave alone killed approximately 70,000 people, while the radiation sickness, cancers, and other illnesses that resulted from the bomb's detonation (and which were largely unforeseen at the time) more than doubled that number.

Surviving the bombing, albeit with severe radiation burns, cemented Kurihara's anti-war sentiments. She began to engage in peace-oriented activism and write new poetry.

In March 1946, Kurihara and her husband attempted to publish *Black Eggs*, a collection of her anti-war poems about the war and the bombing. The occupying United States forces deemed the poems too graphic and censored them. Furthermore, the United States Counterintelligence Corps labeled Mr. Kurihara a threat to American security & threatened him with, among other things, exile to Okinawa,<sup>5</sup> but Mr. Kurihara refused to cooperate. He would say only that he had been led to believe America was a democratic nation that promoted freedom of expression.<sup>6</sup>

### BIOGRAPHY

- Born in 1913 in Hiroshima
- Was living in Hiroshima when the atomic bomb exploded, after which she began writing anti-war poetry
- Became an anti-nuclear activist
- Died in 2005 at the age of 92

Despite censorship and intimidation, *Black Eggs* was published with its anti-war message intact, though overt criticism of the United States was removed. No matter: it still sold 3,000 copies, not a small total for poetry. *Black Eggs* was Sadako Kurihara's first major work. In it she displayed a style and ideology that would typify much of her later poetry. She never hesitated to criticize nuclear weaponry or government justifications for using it.

In addition to blaming the United States, Kurihara expressed doubts about the way the Japanese government handled the bombing. She was also quick to criticize Japanese wartime atrocities and policies that victimized other nations during World War II; Kurihara was particularly outspoken against the Japanese occupation of Korea and China. She championed the causes of social justice, human rights, peace, anti-nuclearism, and free love (the idea that people should have many lovers).<sup>7</sup> She often chose to focus her poetry on these general beliefs, rather than criticize a specific nation or take sides in a particular conflict.

The Hiroshima bombing also propelled Kurihara into a lasting career as an activist, sharing her ideas in intellectual circles and speaking at conferences. She started the Hiroshima Mothers' Group Against A-Bombs and H-Bombs in 1969 while continuing her literary career, founding the Chugoku Bunmei Renmei (Chugoku Culture Association) and editing the first issue of "Chugoku Bunka" ("The Chugoku Cultural Magazine").

<sup>5</sup> Okinawa is the Japanese equivalent of Siberia, but without the Russian accents.

<sup>6</sup> Tell me, Mr. Anderson...what good is freedom of expression if you're...unable to speak?

<sup>7</sup> And alpaca farming.



At times, Kurihara combined activism and poetry. She gave out her anthology of poetry about Hiroshima, “The River of Flame Running in Japan,” at the Sixth World Conference Against A-Bombs and H-Bombs. She founded the journal “The Rivers in Hiroshima” and organized a publishing committee to release “The Songs of Hiroshima” in both Japanese and English. Kurihara also edited the journal “Testimony of Hiroshima and Nagasaki” in 1982, and published essays on anti-nuclearism and other causes, such as her 1975 “Embracing the Core Scene of Hiroshima.”

Kurihara’s anti-nuclear publications earned her a reputation as a talented writer and outspoken intellectual, as well as invitations to attend numerous conferences on anti-nuclearism, human rights, social justice, and related subjects. These included the NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) International Symposium on The Reality of the A-Bomb, the 1982 International Literary Conference in Cologne, Germany, and the 1983 Conference of Asian Writers in Hiroshima. In 1990, Sadako Kurihara was awarded a great honor: the third Tanimoto Kiyoshi Peace Prize.

Kurihara died at the age of 92 in March 2005, just before the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima.

### “We Shall Bring Forth New Life” (1946)<sup>8</sup>

#### Text (English Translation)

It was a night spent in the basement of a burnt-out building.

People injured by the atomic bomb took shelter in this room, filling it.

They passed the night in darkness, not even a single candle among them.

The raw smell of blood, the **stench** of death.

Body heat and the **reek** of sweat. Moaning.

Miraculously, out of the darkness, a voice sounded:

“The baby’s coming!”

In that basement room, in those lower reaches of hell,

A young woman was now going into labor.

What were they to do,

Without even a single match to light the darkness?

People forgot their own suffering to do what they could.

A seriously injured woman who had been injured but a moment before,

Spoke out:

“I’m a **midwife**. Let me help with the birth.”

And now life was born

There in the deep, dark depths of hell.

Her work done, the midwife did not even wait for the break of day.

She died, still covered with blood.

Bring **forth** new life!

Even if it should cost me my own,

Bring forth new life!

#### Vocabulary

**stench:** a strong, unpleasant smell

**reek:** a disgusting, strong smell

**midwife:** a person trained to help mothers give birth

**forth:** onward, forward in time or place

#### DemiTranslation

The night was spent in the basement of a building burned by the bomb.

Injured people packed into the room, seeking shelter. It was a dark night,

and no one had a candle. The room was filled by the smells of blood,

death, and sweat, and heated by the people’s bodies pressed together.

People were moaning. Suddenly, miraculously, in the darkness of the

basement, a young woman cried “The baby’s coming!” She had gone

into labor. People were at a loss for what to do, without even a single

match to create light, but they forgot their own suffering in order to help.

A seriously injured woman spoke up, as though she were not injured, and

volunteered to help with the birth.

She had been a midwife, and she

delivered the baby in that dark, miserable basement room. As soon as

she finished delivering the baby, she died, even before the sun rose. She

was still covered with blood.

Let new life come out!

Even if I die doing so,

Let new life come out!

<sup>8</sup> Also known as: “Let Us Be Midwives!”



## Overview and Classification

“We Shall Bring Forth New Life” was published in Japanese in March 1946 and in English in 1980. Kurihara intended the poem to be almost **prophetic** (predictive of the future) in warning the world of the danger of nuclear weapons. As she declares in another poem, “I who survived Hiroshima/ Will witness wherever I go,/ And sing with all my heart/ “No more wars on earth!” However, “We Shall Bring Forth New Life” does not directly condemn nuclear warfare; rather, it demonstrates the strength of the human spirit and—through symbolism—urges its readers to create a new age of non-violence.

The incident described in “We Shall Bring Forth New Life” actually happened in the basement of the old Hiroshima Savings Bureau, a regional postal savings office. Kurihara was not there during the bombing; she based the poem on hearsay. After the atomic bomb detonated, a pregnant woman in the basement began to experience labor pains, possibly brought on early by the effects of the bomb. A midwife was in the basement as well and, though her left arm and back were badly burned, she helped deliver the baby. Someone ventured out of the building that night and found a halfway-melted bowl among the ruins, which the midwife filled with water and used to give the baby its customary first bath.<sup>9</sup>

As Kurihara recounts in the poem, the midwife died before morning; a witness later

remarked that both the mother and child probably owed their lives to the midwife.<sup>10</sup> Kurihara’s poem eventually reached the mother who gave birth in the poem. After reading “We Shall Bring Forth New Life,” she praised Kurihara’s account of the event, telling her: “You gave expression in your poem to the situation in that basement and our sentiments as if you had been there.”

## Form and Meter

Poets writing in English create rhythm and meter by arranging patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. This works because English speakers tend to emphasize certain syllables more than others, and poets writing in English try to make the rhythm of their poems follow the natural stresses of speech.

Japanese does not work this way. For one thing, it has a **syllabic** alphabet rather than a **phonetic** alphabet. This means that each character in the Japanese alphabet<sup>11</sup> represents one syllable, rather than a vowel or a consonant. A syllable may consist of a vowel, a consonant, or a consonant followed by a vowel, such as ka, ki, ku, ke, and ko, and words comprise of a certain number of syllables. They are more equally stressed than syllables in English. A poet writing in Japanese, consequently, would have a great deal of trouble making his poem’s rhythm follow the

### Overview

- Published in March, 1946
- Describes true events that happened in the basement of a post office on the night of August 6, 1945

### Debate it!

Resolved: That “We Shall Bring Forth New Life” is a feminist poem.

### Form and Meter

- Meter is based more on the syllable count than the stress given to certain syllables
- Kurihara’s poems often deviate from traditional Japanese poetic forms
- “We Shall Bring Forth new Life” follows Japanese tanka tradition by presenting one idea or image per line

<sup>9</sup> Exceptions were not made for radioactive bowls.

<sup>10</sup> The baby, now a woman, runs a pub in Hiroshima.

<sup>11</sup> Japanese actually has two alphabets, as well as a set of characters adapted from Chinese called kanji—but it has only one set of syllables.



natural stresses of speech. Instead, Japanese poetry creates rhythm by designating how many syllables should be in a line.

The **tanka**, which originated in 7<sup>th</sup>-century Japan, is defined by its 31 syllables, often forming a single line. When translated into English, a tanka is usually split into 5 lines, the first and third having five syllables and the rest seven syllables. Each line consists of a single idea or image, yet the lines are intended to flow into one another. “We Shall Bring Forth New Life” is not a tanka, but it does mimic the thematic structure of one; each line contains a separate image or idea, and these images flow together smoothly to create a whole image.

In its structure, “We Shall Bring Forth New Life” is like a montage. Each image is made distinct by its placement in a separate line, but together they convey a single scene. The first line of the poem gives the general setting; the second names the inhabitants of the building; the third line describes the darkness of the night and the fourth the smells that surround the people. Piece by piece, Kurihara constructs a scene that is at once horrible and wonderful.

Life emerges from darkness and death, fragment by fragment, and Kurihara makes these fragments seem sharp—the snapshots highly focused—by keeping her language simple and sparse. Instead of using a full sentence to create an image, such as, “The basement was filled with the raw smell of blood and the stench of death,” she divides the image into sensations, writing: “The raw smell of blood, the stench of death. Body heat and the reek of sweat. Moaning.” In addition to making the images clear, these sentence fragments help us get a sense of what being in the basement was like: dark, with nothing to see and nothing to do but stay still, listen, and smell.

The poem’s fragmented form also highlights the glorious simplicity of the event in the basement. Amid the chaos, the basement is like a pocket of familiar straightforwardness. Outside, the world is destroyed, but inside, an everyday<sup>12</sup> event is taking place: a woman is giving birth. Before the woman goes into labor, the people are frozen, not knowing what to do—how to proceed in a newly shattered world. Once she begins to give birth, everyone in the room is focused on her. Through poetic structure alone—by assembling fragmented images into a coherent whole—Kurihara sends a message to her audience: it is crucial for people to band together, to unify, even when their world is shattered.

## Poetic Devices and Meaning

To quote a movie that is set in Japan, much of Kurihara’s work becomes “lost in translation.” Japanese employs a **syntax** (arrangement of words), poetic tradition, and poetic devices are different from those of the English language.

When poems in languages extremely dissimilar to English are translated into English, they often lose their poetic devices, especially **sonic devices**<sup>13</sup> like rhyme, meter, alliteration, assonance, and consonance. Because different languages have different ways of saying things, a figurative phrase in one language may sound strangely literal in another. A translator may have to use an expression that conveys the right meaning in English, but at the expense of the subtle meanings of that expression in the original language.<sup>14</sup> We must keep the limitations of translation in mind as we examine “We Shall Bring Forth New Life” and the other translated poems in this year’s curriculum.

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<sup>12</sup> It may happen everyday, but it is not an everyday happening.

<sup>13</sup> Those involving sound; not those involving a blue, animated hedgehog.

<sup>14</sup> Just think of trying to translate Bart Simpson’s favorite expression, “eat my shorts,” into another language. It is supposed to mean something like “I don’t care about what you think,” but it could end up sounding completely literal in



The most prominent poetic device in “We Shall Bring Forth New Life” is **imagery**, the use of sensual (sense-based) language to create an image in the reader’s mind. Kurihara’s imagery makes the poem highly vivid: we can sense the darkness, “the raw smell of blood, the stench of death” that she describes. Using these sensory snapshots, Kurihara transforms our detached understanding of the bombing—dates and statistics—into a personal experience of individual fear and suffering. Far from being abstract, these images are clear and terrible: sweat, blood, decay, and stifling darkness.

Kurihara employs **metaphor**, a figurative comparison between two items without the words “like” or “as.” In line 8, she writes:

“In that basement room, in those lower reaches of hell.” The basement room is not literally hell, but Kurihara compares it to hell in order to emphasize the suffering of the people trapped there. They are living through a level of suffering that no living person should have to experience.

These poetic devices reveal Kurihara’s anti-nuclear stance. They emphasize the destruction and suffering that the atomic bomb caused. Its trauma that the people of Hiroshima, and by extension all of humanity, experienced as they were thrust into “the lower reaches of hell.”<sup>15</sup> The poem’s opening images condemn division and war, highlighting their danger; they have the potential to destroy humanity and our planet.

“We Shall Bring Forth New Life” is an anti-war poem, but its **symbolism** makes it even more a pro-unity poem. It begins at night amid chaos, but it ends just before dawn, with the death of a midwife and the birth of a child. The birth and dawn are both new beginnings, of a life and a new day, respectively. They symbolize hope for the future of Hiroshima. The death of the midwife, a victim of the bomb, is a terrible thing. At the same time, it demonstrates the incredible power of determination. The midwife’s wounds are fatal, but she forces herself to survive long enough to deliver the baby. Similarly, suggests Kurihara, the people of Hiroshima must strive to build a new future for their city—to deliver new hope in a shattered world.

“We Shall Bring Forth New Life” extends its message more broadly, to all of humanity in troubled times. It becomes an **allegory** (symbolic story) of the need for human cooperation in periods of pain and chaos. Through the story of the midwife, Kurihara models how people should strive for unity and peace even in the face of unimaginable horror.

“What [are people] to do,” Kurihara asks us, “without a single candle to light the darkness?”<sup>16</sup> The answer comes in the allegory of the midwife, mother and child: people must work together. They must transcend their own suffering and fear in order to help one another. In turn, they help themselves, forgetting their desperation and becoming hopeful. The baby’s birth transforms the basement from “hell” back into Earth, from a place of endless torment back into reality. If a few

## Poetic Devices and Meaning

- Uses vivid imagery and metaphor to convey the horror wrought by the atomic bomb; in this sense, is an anti-war poem
- Kurihara uses symbolism to transform a true event into an allegory of the need for human cooperation in times of chaos
- Repetition emphasizes Kurihara’s central message

## Debate it!

Resolved: That “We Shall Bring Forth New Life” is a depressing poem.

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translation, more like “please ingest my short pants.” Now suppose there were supposed to be a pun on the word “shorts”—maybe something about being short. It just wouldn’t work.

<sup>15</sup> As opposed to the more pleasant upper reaches.

<sup>16</sup> I would recommend a flashlight.



people in a basement, without any resources, can do something so miraculous, Kurihara seems to suggest, imagine what change whole nations could bring about if they would only cooperate.

The end of the poem restates the importance of hope and the resilience of the human spirit using **repetition**. Kurihara repeats the rallying exclamation: “Bring forth new life! Bring forth new life! Even if it should cost us our own.” She urges us to realize that, especially in seemingly hopeless situations, hope and progress are more important than life itself. Kurihara does not despair over the horrors of war, nor does she condemn humanity for being warlike—at least not in this poem. Rather than focus on the destroyers, she portrays the survivors, full of the power to create, to “bring forth.”

“We Shall Bring Forth New Life” is a testament to human solidarity, which wins out even in moments of deepest division. The unity of the people in the basement outshines the darkness and outweighs, for a moment, the horribly divided world outside the basement. The poem, fitting for an activist author, is not only beautiful but also inspiring. It urges us to follow the example of the people in the basement, to be active, to change the world. We must bring forth new life, Kurihara tells us; humanity must go on, despite death and disaster, and each of us should help usher in the dawn that banishes the darkness.

## Conclusion

What we have learned so far:

- Kurihara was born in Hiroshima and witnessed the destruction that the atomic bomb caused during World War II. She became an anti-war activist and poet.
- “We Shall Bring Forth New Life” relates real events that happened in the basement of a Hiroshima postal office on the night of August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1945. It is written in free verse and also borrows from the structure of a Japanese poetic form called the tanka, which combines lines of single images to create a full picture.
- The poem is a tribute to the bravery of the people of Hiroshima. It is also an allegory of the need for human cooperation in times of chaos.



## II. Rudyard Kipling: “We and They”

**Rudyard Kipling might be the only Nobel Laureate ever to use the word “kitcheny” or write a story about why rhinoceroses have wrinkly skin.** Like many a good writer’s, Kipling’s work was too controversial for adults—so he began writing it for children.

### Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to answer the following questions:

- Who was Rudyard Kipling and where did he live during his lifetime?
- What were Kipling’s views on British imperialism and what experiences formed them?
- For what kinds of audiences did Kipling intend his works?
- What are the form, tone, and message of “We and They”?

### Rudyard Kipling

On December 30, 1865, Joseph Rudyard Kipling was born in Bombay (now Mumbai), India. His father, John Lockwood Kipling, was the head of the Department of Architectural Studies at Jejeebhoy School of Art and Industry. Our poet spent a happy childhood there traipsing about the fruit markets with his ayah (nanny) and sister, and making a mess of his father’s art studio. In the afternoons, their ayah told Kipling and his sister stories that inspired Kipling to write his own.

Kipling and his sister loved India, but they did not remain there for long. In 1871, they began their education at Captain Holloway’s boarding school in Southsea, England, an experience they both despised. Captain Holloway’s wife, who ran the boarding school, was a cruel woman who frequently beat them. It could not have helped that Kipling was an aggressive and pampered child who enjoyed causing trouble.<sup>17</sup> Things worsened when good-natured Captain Holloway died, prompting Kipling to take shelter in the world of literature. He began reading the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Bret Harte as well as adventure novels such as *Robinson Crusoe*.

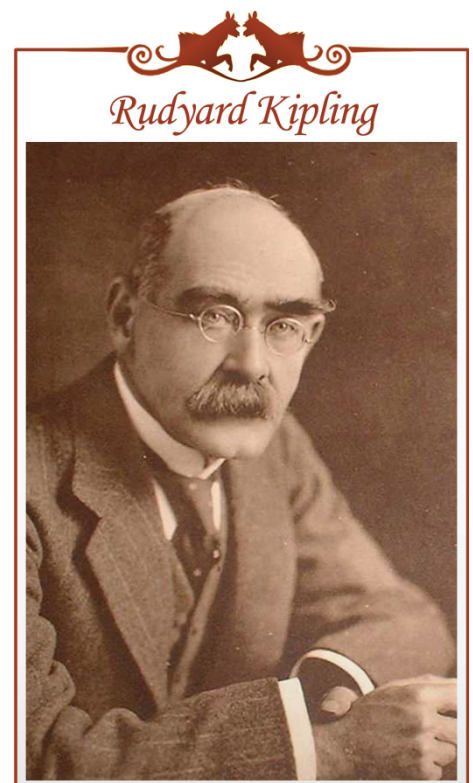


Image credit: <http://www.poems.net.au>

<sup>17</sup> He once stomped down a quiet country road shouting “Out of the way, out of the way, there’s an angry Ruddy coming!” This is not recommended during the World Scholar’s Cup World Finals flag march.



Kipling and his sister were allowed a brief respite from the boarding school every December, when they visited their Aunt Georgie in London. During these treasured visits, they spent time with their uncle, an avant-garde painter who was rather good at entertaining children.<sup>18</sup>

In 1877, Kipling's mother allowed him to escape from "The House of Desolation," as he called the Holloway house, and sent him to the United Services College in Devon, England, a school for the children of army officers. Because Kipling had to wear thick glasses, his fellow students and even his schoolteachers frequently bullied him. Kipling learned to ignore the teasing and began building his reputation as a wordsmith. While in school, he published his first book of poetry, *Schoolboy Lyrics*, and edited the school newspaper. The school's headmaster encouraged Kipling's literary interests. Kipling also made a few close friends his own age.<sup>19</sup>

In 1881, Kipling moved to Lahore, then a part of India,<sup>20</sup> to live with his parents. Soon after, he became the assistant editor at an Anglo-Indian paper called *Civil and Military Gazette*; he would later edit its sister paper, *The Pioneer*.

Kipling did not like staying in one place, so he became a traveling reporter, adventuring all over India and the United States writing essays and reviews.<sup>21</sup> He also composed poetry and published several short stories, including "The Man Who Would Be King" (1888) and "Gunga Din" (1890). Kipling also started publishing collections of his work, including two poetry collections, *Departmental Ditties* (1886) and *Barrack-Room Ballads* (1892), and two books of short stories, *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888) and *Wee Willie Winkie* (1888).

Eventually, Kipling returned to England and set up residence just off the Strand, a famous street in London. Around 1890, his reputation as a writer truly began to grow. Readers loved the catchy rhythms of Kipling's poetry, his use of a working-class dialect called **Cockney** slang, and his sentiments about the British Empire and **imperialism** (empire-building). Critics disapproved of him for the same reasons.

While in England, Kipling met Carrie Balestier, the sister of his American publisher. Romance followed and they were married in January 1892, during an influenza epidemic.<sup>22</sup> The Kiplings honeymooned in Yokohama, Japan, where they learned that their bank, New Oriental Banking Company, had collapsed; Kipling's savings were lost. At that point, the Kiplings had nothing but their luggage and their clothing. They made their way to the United States, and eventually moved to a residence they called "The Naulakha." While living there, Kipling befriended **President Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt**,<sup>23</sup> a fellow tropical animal enthusiast, adventurer, and larger-than-life personality.

### Biography

- Born in Mumbai, India, on December 30<sup>th</sup>, 1865
- Sent to a boarding school in England
- Returned to India to become a journalist
- Became a traveling reporter, then returned to England
- Grew famous/Became famous for his stories
- Moved to the United States, married Carrie Balestier, and had two children
- Began publishing children's books
- Won the Nobel Prize in 1907
- Died in 1936

<sup>18</sup> Kipling's uncle once convinced Kipling and his sister that a tube of paint was made out of ground-up Egyptian pharaohs. They mummified it and buried it accordingly.

<sup>19</sup> Nerds tend to have the most loyal friends. I would know.

<sup>20</sup> Now a major city in Pakistan, as you may know from living there, from the news, or from last year's novel.

<sup>21</sup> His effort to start the World Scholar's Cup ended in a confused mess when none of the teams arrived in Lahore on the same day. Several were also kidnapped by pirates.

<sup>22</sup> How romantic.

<sup>23</sup> For whom the teddy bear is named. Truly.



In the United States, Kipling experienced first-hand rising anti-British sentiment when the United States grew involved in a British colonial conflict. This was compounded by a dispute between Kipling and his publisher, and eventually the Kiplings decided to move back to England, buying a home they called “The Elms” in Sussex.<sup>24</sup> In 1894, Kipling became very popular there with the publication of *The Jungle Book* and *The Second Jungle Book*. *The Jungle Book* would become Kipling’s best-known work, and would also inspire United States author Edgar Rice Burroughs to create the famous fictional character Tarzan.

Rudyard and Carrie traveled a great deal, together with their three children, Josephine, Elsie and John. In 1898, they visited South Africa, which they enjoyed immensely. They also made regular trips back to the United States until 1899, when they all caught pneumonia in Vermont and Kipling’s eldest daughter, a very lively and witty girl, died. Kipling was devastated, and thereafter took solace in his work. In 1901, he published *Kim*, often considered his finest novel, which tells the story of a young Irish boy growing up on the streets of Lahore. Kipling’s personal experience of Lahore made for a highly descriptive piece of writing.

In 1902, the Kiplings moved for the last time to a home they called “Bateman’s” in Sussex. Kipling began some literary experimentation, exploring new subjects and techniques. Previously fond of (and popular for) writing about soldiers for an adult audience, Kipling directed his new work toward children. One of his most famous collections, *Just So Stories*, emerged from this period of experimentation. The short stories in the collection, such as “How the Camel Got His Hump” and “How the Leopard Got His Spots,” described how the world got to be the way it was.

Kipling was particularly gifted at writing children’s books. His stories had rich, fanciful language and interesting, serious topics. Just as importantly, his work was dignified instead of patronizing. Kipling’s talent for observing the world around him, his original presentation of events and ideas, and his engaging narratives served him well in the literary community as well as in children’s bookstores. In 1907, Rudyard Kipling added the Nobel Prize in Literature to his list of accomplishments (he had previously been made England’s Poet Laureate).

The loss of Kipling’s son, John, in World War I made him understandably bitter. A desire for vengeance and cruelty began showing in his works; he soon fell out of favor with audiences. His unpopular political views did not help; among other things, he wanted all men to serve in the military.

To this day, Kipling remains a very controversial literary figure. Though he sympathized greatly with the lower classes, he supported imperialism and denounced democratic government. Kipling’s children’s books are still considered his best works, perhaps because they brought out his more sympathetic side and allowed him to use the playful language with which he was so talented.

Kipling died in 1936 of a hemorrhage caused by a painful stomach ulcer. He lies buried in the Poet’s Corner of Westminster Abbey, among England’s most highly regarded authors.

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<sup>24</sup> The American public didn’t like him that much anyway, because he wouldn’t talk to the press.



## "We and They" (1926)

### Text

Father and Mother, and Me,  
 Sister and Auntie say  
 All the people like us are We,  
 And every one else is They.  
 And They live over the sea,  
 While We live over the way,  
 But—would you believe it?—They look upon We  
 As only a sort of They!

We eat pork and beef  
 With cow-horn-handled<sup>25</sup> knives.  
 They who gobble Their rice off a leaf,  
 Are horrified out of Their lives;  
 While they who live up a tree,  
 And feast on **grubs** and clay,  
 (Isn't it **scandalous**?) look upon We  
 As a simply disgusting They!

We shoot birds with a gun.  
 They stick lions with spears.  
 Their full-dress is un-  
 We dress up to Our ears.  
 They like Their friends for tea.  
 We like Our friends to stay;  
 And, after all that, They look upon We  
 As an utterly ignorant They!

We eat **kitcheny** food.  
 We have doors that latch.  
 They drink milk or blood,  
 Under an open **thatch**.  
 We have Doctors to fee.  
 They have Wizards to pay.  
 And (**impudent heathen!**) They look upon We  
 As a quite impossible They!

All good people agree,  
 And all good people say,  
 All nice people, like Us, are We  
 And every one else is They:  
 But if you cross over the sea,  
 Instead of over the way,  
 You may end by (think of it!) looking on We  
 As only a sort of They!

### Vocabulary

**grubs:** the larvae of various insects  
**scandalous:** unbelievably improper

**kitcheny:** ordinary, what one might find in a Western kitchen

**thatch:** a roof made of plant material

**impudent:** impertinent, cheeky, not displaying proper deference

**heathen:** one who does not worship the god of the speaker, implied to be uncivilized

### DemiTranslation

Father, mother, me, sister, and auntie say that people like us are "We" and everyone else is "They."  
 "They" live over the sea, far away, while "We" live nearby.  
 But yet, incredibly, "They" see "Us" As "They."

"We" eat things like pork and beef, with eating utensils like knives with handles made of cow horns. People who do strange things like eat rice off of leaves find our eating habits bizarre and horrific, and people who live in trees and eat bugs and clay (Isn't it gross and fascinating?) think that "We" are the strange and disgusting ones.

We shoot birds with a gun, while they hunt lions with spears.

We wear clothing that covers us up to the ears, while they go completely nude.

They invite their friends over for tea, and we invite our friends to stay.  
 And yet, despite all this, they look upon "We" as an totally ignorant "They"!

We eat food that is cooked properly, and have locks on our doors. They drink milk or blood in flimsy huts. We pay doctors when we get sick, while they rely on magicians,  
 And yet these heathens see us, though it's completely untrue, as "They"

All good, proper, normal people agree that nice people, like us, are "We", and everyone else is "They":  
 But if you travel across the sea instead of just staying here,  
 You may end up (my goodness!) thinking that "We" are only another type of "They"!

<sup>25</sup> This is a reference to Hindu culture, which holds cows sacred.



## Overview and Classification

Kipling published “We and They” in 1926 in a collection of poems and short stories entitled *Debts and Credits*. The works in it were written mostly between October 1923 and August 1925, inspired by a trip Kipling and his wife took to Scotland. There he served as Rector at a university, much to the students’ delight. The pupils’ youthful spirit<sup>26</sup> pulled Kipling out of the sadness and seriousness that had surrounded him since his son’s death. Soon after his return from Scotland, he began work on what would become *Debts and Credits*.

Many of the stories in *Debts and Credits* pay subtle homage to the Freemasons, a secret society in England to which Kipling belonged. Kipling had a fondness for ritual and secrecy that persisted throughout his life; a journalist to the core, he liked to keep his sources confidential.

Critical reception of *Debts and Credits* was mixed. While many reviewers liked the work, they also found that Kipling had changed. *Debts and Credits* was not as brightly imaginative as Kipling’s earlier work (there was a distinct lack of rhinoceroses). On the other hand, it showed a control, depth, and tolerance that Kipling previously lacked.

“We and They” is one of 19 poems in *Debts and Credits*, and it reveals one of the contradictions Kipling personally embodied. He was a conservative, staunch imperialist (and often a racist and anti-Semite), but—having been brought up in a family that was not part of the higher classes, he was also quick to criticize aspects of British imperialism such as the snobbery that often underlay it, and to champion diversity and open-mindedness. The playful poem “We and They” mocks the narrow, self-centered worldviews of many British people during Kipling’s time.

### Form and Meter

- ☑ Poetic meter is a regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry
- ☑ “We and They” has an irregular meter—sometimes iambic, sometimes trochaic, sometimes anapestic
- ☑ Its rhyme scheme and logical progression helps to organize it
- ☑ The meter and rhyme scheme of “We and They” makes it catchy and suitable for children

## Form and Meter

Many poems depend on **meter**, careful patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables, to give them structure. “We and They” is not one of them; it depends more on rhyme and rhythm. There are instances of meter in “We and They,” but they do not add up to a formal structure. For example, in certain places, Kipling employs the playful **anapestic foot**, a set of syllables arranged in an unstressed-unstressed-stressed order, for example the word “**overseas**” (putting stress on the bolded syllable). In other places, Kipling uses **iambic** (“**dum-dum**”) or **trochaic** (“**dum-dum**”) feet.

Anapestic meter is usually considered too lively for poetry, but since Kipling wrote much of his poetry for children, he could get away with using it—and with mixing different metric feet within a single **stanza** (paragraph of a poem).<sup>27</sup> In the first stanza, the unstressed and stressed syllables are organized as such:

**F**ather,	**M**other,	and **M**e
**S**ister	and **A**un	tie **s**ay
All the **p**eo	ple like **u**s	are **W**e,
And **e**v	eryone **e**lse	is **T**hey.

<sup>26</sup> And perhaps his nifty ceremonial kilt as well.

<sup>27</sup> The result is that “We and They” metrically resembles an omelet with several different fillings.



And **They**	live **ov**	er the **sea**,	
While **We**	live **ov**	er the **way**,	
But – **would**	you be**lieve**	it? - They **look**	upon **We**
As **on**	ly a **sort**	of **They**!	

The line “All the **people** like **us** are **We**” is made up of two anapests followed by an iamb. Trochaic feet in the stanza include “**F**ather” and “**S**ister.” Though his meter was not as precise as other poets’, Kipling took care to alternate the stresses on his words—resulting in a poem that sounds much livelier than ordinary speech when read aloud.

Complementing the mixed meter of “We and They” is its regular **rhyme scheme**. Each series of eight letters in the pattern below denotes a stanza, and each letter denotes a specific rhyme (the “a” rhymes, for example, are “me,” “we,” “see,” “tree,” and so on). The poem follows this pattern:

ABABABAB  
 CDCDABAB  
 EFEFABAB  
 GHGHABAB  
 ABABABAB

In its rhyme scheme, “We and They” is somewhat symmetrical. Where “a” represents a long E vowel sound and “b” represents a long A vowel sound, the first and last stanzas have the pattern “abababab,” while other stanzas end with “abab.” The rhyme scheme helps make the poem seem catchy and playful even though it examines the serious topics of prejudice and division.

The logical structure of “We and They” also helps to organize it. The stanzas list contrasts between “We” and “They” from the viewpoint of “We,” and each stanza ends in a **refrain**,<sup>28</sup> a repeated line, along the lines of “They look upon We/ As only a sort of They!” The refrain of “We and They” is its main idea: the people *we* consider bizarre foreigners consider *us* bizarre foreigners in return.

## Poetic Devices and Meaning

In “We and They,” Kipling favors **metonymy**, a figure of speech in which a term substitutes for a name, idea or phrase closely related to it. This poetic device is found in the poem’s very title—“We” and “They” are both metonymies; “We” stands in for a familiar culture (English culture), while “They” represents a variety of foreign cultures.

Metonymy is an all-purpose poetic device in “We and They.” For starters, it makes the poem read far more smoothly; “We eat pork and beef” is easy to say, but “People in my country eat pork and beef” is a bit of a mouthful.<sup>29</sup> In addition to standing for “people like us” and “people not like us,” the words “We” and “They” suggest the attitude that “We” are superior to “They.”

These words point out the human tendency to divide into small, inward-looking groups. Instead of relating to other people by noticing shared characteristics (we all prepare and eat food; we all build

### Poetic Devices

- “We” and “They” are metonymies for a familiar culture and foreign cultures
- Kipling uses irony to convey his views on British society
- Playful meter and diction make the narrator seem childish, but tone and content depict adult prejudices

<sup>28</sup> The refrain of a poem is like the chorus of a song. Example: “If you liked it then you shoulda’ put a ring on it...”

<sup>29</sup> A larger mouthful than pork and beef.



shelters), people tend to focus on differences (they eat strange food; their shelters are not like ours). The poem’s speaker could easily refer to all people in the world as “We,” but instead he chooses to separate the “We” from the “They” and belittle the “They”.<sup>30</sup>

Kipling uses the **tone** of the poem to implicitly mock the speaker. While exclamations like “Isn’t it scandalous?” and “impudent heathen!” make the speaker seem like an arrogant upper-class English adult, he seems childish in other sections of the poem. Not only does he refer to “Father and Mother and Me / Sister and Auntie,” and use words like “gobble”, he also exclaims with childlike wonder: “would you believe it?”

### Meaning

- Mocks a narrow black-and-white worldview, which highlights differences rather than similarities
- Parodies some of the elitist attitudes behind British imperialism

Put another way, the narrator of “We and They”, a childish adult, is a **parody** (a mocking

### Debate it!

Resolved: That “We and They” is a racist poem.

representation) of the British upper class. Using **hyperbole** (exaggeration), in the form of the interjected exclamations like “isn’t it scandalous?” Kipling makes his narrator seem especially prejudiced and ignorant. After all, the narrator is completely shocked by shallow differences such as style of dress and food. Through humor, Kipling suggests that British imperialism is founded on arbitrary prejudice. We do not choose to be born “over the sea” or “over the way.”

The poem’s main point, “They look upon We / As only a sort of They!” points out the uselessness of prejudice. One nation or culture is not necessarily better than another; who is “We” and who is “They” is purely a matter of perspective. Were one to reverse all the instances of “We” and “They” in the poem, the Britons would seem like bizarre foreigners in place of the cultures they colonize.

Had Kipling suggested British upper-class adults were immature in, say, a magazine article, critics would have eaten him alive for being unpatriotic. Instead, Kipling concealed his social commentary in a children’s poem. **Diction** (word choice) helps Kipling accomplish this; it is hard to be insulted by a poem that uses words such as “kitcheny” and “gobble.” The bouncy meter and rhyme scheme in “We and They” accentuate its playfulness and make its criticism of imperialism easier to digest.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

Let’s review what we’ve learned so far:

- Kipling was British, but born in India. In some respects, he was very imperialistic and prejudiced. However, he disliked some imperialists’ superior attitude towards other cultures.
- Much of Kipling’s work, including “We and They” and *Just So Stories*, is child-friendly and uses playful diction and rhyme.
- “We and They” has an irregular, catchy meter, a fairly symmetrical rhyme scheme, and a refrain. It contains playful diction and uses irony, hyperbole, and parody to make its point.
- “We and They” parodies British imperialism’s attitude toward other cultures. Each stanza contrasts the speaker’s culture and other cultures, but the refrain minimizes these contrasts.

<sup>30</sup> We shoot birds with a gun, they stick lions with spears. Really, so what? We’re both killing fluffy creatures.

<sup>31</sup> What was it Mary Poppins said: “a spoonful of humor helps the mockery go down”?



## III. Langston Hughes: "I, Too, Sing America"

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I could take the Harlem night  
and wrap around you,  
Take the neon lights and make a crown,  
Take the Lenox Avenue busses,  
Taxis, subways,  
And for your love song tone their rumble down.

So wrote Langston Hughes, an icon of United States poetry. Hughes wove his art in a New York City sharply divided by race. Whether he was celebrating the culture on his side of New York, the neighborhood of Harlem, or addressing the rift between black and white people, Hughes breathed meaning and rhythm into words—so that they resonated with audiences across the racial divide.

### Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to answer the following questions:

- Who was Langston Hughes, and what were his poetic influences?
- What are the recurring themes in Hughes' poetry?
- For what audience did Hughes primarily write?
- What is the message of "I, Too, Sing America"?

### Langston Hughes

February 1, 1902 was like any other day in history—except that the great poet Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri. His mother, Carrie Hughes, was a domestic worker. His father, James Hughes, was an aspiring lawyer, but he was forbidden from taking the bar exam required to become a lawyer because he was African-American.

Fed up with the racism that was then legal in the United States, James Hughes left for Mexico when Langston was a young boy. Carrie tried to follow him there, but returned to the United States after experiencing a strong earthquake in Mexico City. That was the end of the Hughes' marriage, which the challenges of racism had already weakened.

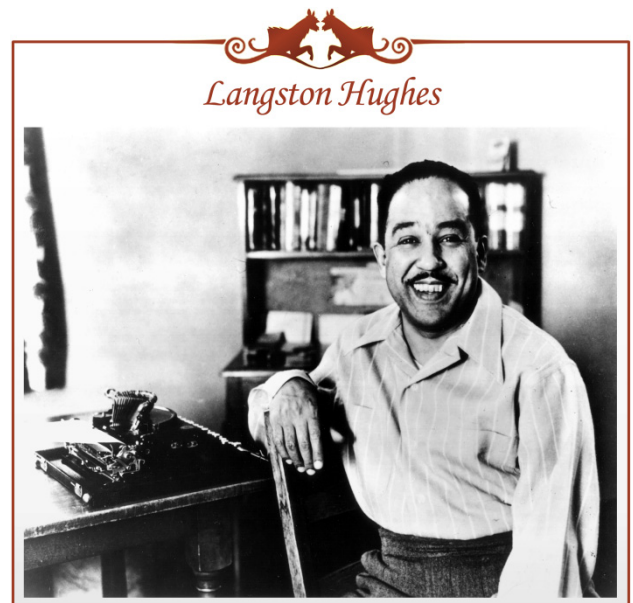


Image credit: <http://www.1968.com/>

After Hughes' parents divorced, his grandmother, **Mary Langston**, raised him while Carrie traveled around looking for work. Hughes found a strong role model in Mary, who was the first black woman to attend Oberlin College and an equal rights activist. In addition to her own example, Mary told



Hughes stories about activists in his family. One of his grandfathers (her first husband) was an **abolitionist**, a person who advocated the end of slavery, and participated in the 1859 raid of the United States Armory and Arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. Hughes' other grandfather (Mary's second husband) was active in the **Underground Railroad**, a network of abolitionists who helped slaves escape from the South of the United States to the North. Mary also took Hughes to hear speeches by African-American leader **Booker T. Washington**, and to the site of a major abolitionist raid in Osawatomie, Kansas.

The inspiration Mary Langston ignited in Hughes would last a lifetime, although she died when he was only thirteen. After that, Hughes went to Lincoln, Illinois, to live with his mother and stepfather, Homer Clark. In grammar school, Hughes' classmates elected him class poet (even though he had never written poetry before) based on a common racial stereotype—that, being African-American, he would have a good sense of rhythm. Even though Hughes' introduction to writing was based on prejudice, it ironically worked to his benefit—and he became a leading artistic figure in the fight for racial equality.

In 1916, Hughes entered high school in Cincinnati, where he served as editor of the school yearbook during his senior year. In 1920, Hughes' father felt a sudden jolt of parental responsibility and requested that Langston visit him in Mexico to discuss his life plans. Langston disliked his father, but decided to comply, hoping his father would fund his college education. Not only did he enjoy learning, but his mother had informed him that she expected him to support her.<sup>32</sup>

While crossing the Mississippi river on his way to Mexico, Langston Hughes wrote his first major poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers,"<sup>33</sup> examining the power of African-Americans' ancient and more recent origins. The poem first appeared in 1921 in *The Crisis*, a journal of the **NAACP** (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People).

During the year he spent with his father in Mexico, Hughes convinced his father to help him with college tuition on the condition that Hughes would study engineering. True to his word, upon his return to the United States, Hughes enrolled in Columbia University's engineering program. Unwilling to tolerate the university's racist environment, he left after his freshman year—only to discover that, being black, he could not find a job as a magazine editor or radio writer.<sup>34</sup> He took a job as a kitchen worker on the *S.S. Malone*, a ship bound for Africa.

In Africa, Hughes experienced his race in a new and complex way; Africans regarded him as white because of his mixed ancestry. From Africa, Hughes sailed to Europe and found work in France, Italy, and Spain. He returned to the United States in 1924, which is when he began his writing career in earnest. In 1926, Hughes released his first collection of poems, *The Weary Blues*, which included "I, Too, Sing America." He also published an essay entitled *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*. The essay highlighted the need for young African-American writers, musicians, and artists

## BIOGRAPHY

- ☑ Born in Joplin, Missouri, on February 1, 1902; raised by his grandmother, who taught him to fight for equality
- ☑ Attended Columbia for a year, then dropped out, became a sailor, and traveled around Europe
- ☑ Returned to the United States in 1924 and began to publish poetry; later also published plays and short stories
- ☑ Published *The Weary Blues* in 1926
- ☑ Key member of the Harlem Renaissance, a literary and artistic movement
- ☑ Wrote for less-educated audiences, tapping musical and storytelling traditions
- ☑ Died in 1967

<sup>32</sup> Thanks, Mom.

<sup>33</sup> Negro is a now-outdated term referring to an African-American person.

<sup>34</sup> He didn't land a magazine job until 1943, when he began writing a weekly column for the *Chicago Defender*.



of all kinds to generate a new type of art. Rather than conform to white standards of artistic beauty and success, said Hughes, African-American artists should embrace and elevate their own culture.

*The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* helped steer a cultural, literary, and artistic movement called the **Harlem Renaissance**, centered in the primarily African-American neighborhood of Harlem in New York City. During the Harlem Renaissance, writers, artists, and activists of African descent did just what Hughes urged in his essay. They defined and celebrated the black experience in the United States from the time of slavery to the present day. As a Harlem Renaissance poet, Hughes found himself in the company of a diverse group of poets, including Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, and Zora Neale Hurston. Each gave voice to the black experience in America using his or her unique style and form.

Like any good cultural movement, the Harlem Renaissance experienced its share of criticism. Certain African-American intellectuals censured Harlem Renaissance writers for relying on white-owned publishing houses. Others accused them of spreading negative stereotypes of African-Americans to both a black and white audience. Hughes' *Fine Clothes to the Jew* generally pleased the white public, but it angered many African-Americans, who considered Hughes' depiction of Harlem's lower classes disgraceful. Hughes responded with this statement:

*"I felt that the masses of our people had as much in their lives to put into books as did those more fortunate ones who had been born with some means and the ability to work up to a master's degree at a Northern college. Anyway, I didn't know the upper class Negroes well enough to write much about them. I knew only the people I had grown up with, and they weren't people whose shoes were always shined, who had been to Harvard, or who had heard of Bach. But they seemed to me good people, too."*

Hughes wrote about, and for, the lower-class people of Harlem because those were the people he knew. He considered their lives and their problems just as worthy of poetry as middle- or upper-class black people's. Throughout his career, Hughes continued to write about the black lower classes, even as he climbed in society.

During his college years, Hughes found a patron, a wealthy white woman named **Charlotte Mason**. He eventually parted ways with her due to, ironically, the opposite problem he had faced with African-American critics. Mason wanted Hughes "to be more African than Harlem," to abandon his urban focus and examine the African roots of his culture—which he could not do, "having grown up in Kansas City, Chicago and Cleveland."

Hughes spent the early 1930s touring the southern United States, the USSR, and Central Asia and exploring the short story genre. He then journeyed to Spain as a traveling correspondent for the newspaper *Afro-American*, describing the lives of African Americans fighting in the Spanish Civil War. Upon his return to the United States in 1938, Hughes founded several theaters: The Harlem Suitcase Theater in New York City, the New Negro Theater in Los Angeles, and the Skyloft Players

### "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921)

*I've known rivers:*

*I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

*I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.*

*I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.*

*I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.*

*I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.*

*I've known rivers:*

*Ancient, dusky rivers.*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

### Debate it!

Resolved: That, in order to write about division, one must have experienced it personally.



in Chicago. Like the plays he wrote and debuted there, Hughes' venues were designed to appeal to the working classes; tickets were inexpensive and performances scheduled around typical work hours.

In 1943, Hughes was commissioned to pen a weekly column for the *Chicago Defender*. His column detailed the adventures of a character he named Jesse B. Semple (meant to evoke the word "Simple"), a working-class African-American man living in Harlem.<sup>35</sup> Semple was Hughes' vehicle for social commentary on the lives of Harlem residents, as well as for telling the short stories he had become so fond of writing.

In 1947, Hughes settled in Harlem, where he spent the last 20 years of his life publishing stories, essays, plays, and poems. A few of the poetry collections he wrote during this time were intended for children, including *The Dream Keeper* and *Black Misery*. He continued, as ever, to frankly present the experience of the common man using the language and rhythms of African-American culture.

Hughes was criticized for not becoming as involved as younger writers in the Civil Rights movement, which occurred in the last years of his life. He died of complications from cancer in 1967.

## "I, Too, Sing America" (1926)

### Text

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen."  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be **ashamed**—

I, too, am America.

### Vocabulary

**ashamed:**  
embarrassed

### DemiTranslation

I am also part of America,

I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody will dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen."  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed (of how they treated  
me)—

I, too, am America.

## Overview and Classification

"I, Too, Sing America" was published in a collection of poems called *The Weary Blues*, in 1926. It was well-received, garnering enough awards to help Hughes finance his college education at Lincoln University.

<sup>35</sup> Hughes based Semple partly on Miguel de Cervantes' famous hero, Don Quixote—despite a distinct lack of giant, imposing windmills in Harlem.



The poems in *The Weary Blues*—including the title poem, about a Harlem street musician—were **lyrical** (expressive). Hughes meant them to be performed with musical accompaniment at Harlem clubs. They were typical of Hughes’ unique poetic voice, often taking a first-person perspective and incorporating the rhythms of African-American speech as well as the musical rhythms of Harlem—jazz and blues.

Hughes credited a great many poets and thinkers for influencing *The Weary Blues*, among them Paul Lawrence Dunbar, W. E. B. DuBois, and Carl Sandburg. The most prominent poetic influence on “I, Too, Sing America,” was really Walt Whitman—but we’ll get to that later. Like the rest of the collection, “I, Too, Sing America” was meant to speak for all African-Americans of Hughes’ time. It evoked their weariness and simultaneous faith in the **American Dream**, the idea of climbing from the lower class to the ranks of the wealthy elite.

## Form

Like “We and They,” “I, Too, Sing America” is written in free verse. In the absence of a traditional poetic form, Hughes uses poetic devices such as repetition to shape the poem and its meaning.

Often, poetic devices work in tandem, and this is the case with Hughes’ use of structure and repetition. The poem is made up of five stanzas that give it visual symmetry. The repetition of certain words and phrases gives the poem a corresponding thematic symmetry; the poem begins and ends with variations of the title, and the phrases “when company comes,” and “eat in the kitchen” repeat.

These repeating phrases also evolve. The first line of the poem is “I, too, sing America,” with the verb “sing” implying exertion on the speaker’s part; he is striving to be a part of America and to prove that he belongs there. In the last line of the poem, the speaker’s thought has evolved into “I, too, am America.” Now instead of “to sing,” the verb is “to be”—the speaker can simply be a part of America—which he has proven himself to be.

In the second stanza, the “company comes” to visit, presumably, the white owners of the house where the speaker works. The company is not coming to visit him; in fact, they do not even want to see him, so he is sent to “eat in the kitchen.” In the third stanza, the speaker feels free to eat with the visitors at the table. The phrase “eat in the kitchen” is no longer a disempowering command, but rather an outdated idea to be mocked.

To emphasize the speaker’s newfound power, Hughes gives the word “Then” its own line and makes it into a sentence. Even though the second stanza does not contain a corresponding “Now,” Hughes implies it; things are unfair now, but they will change. Today, the speaker is seen in comparison to white Americans as the “darker brother,” but “Tomorrow” he will be seen for what he is: “beautiful.” He is oppressed and denied his identity now, but later—“Then”—he will become enfranchised and claim his place at the table, his status as an American.

## OVERVIEW

- ☑ Published in 1926 in *The Weary Blues* the title poem being about a Harlem street musician
- ☑ The poems were lyrical and meant to be performed with musical accompaniment at Harlem clubs
- ☑ Influenced by Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Walt Whitman, W.E.B DuBois, and Carl Sandburg

## Form

- ☑ Written in free verse
- ☑ Achieves visual and thematic symmetry through repetition, with the repeated phrases evolving to mirror the speaker’s shift from oppression to equality



Hughes' repetition of the word "And" provides another type of contrast between the speaker and the people who oppress him. Referring to himself in the second stanza, he states: "And eat well, / And grow strong," but, referring to his oppressors in the fourth stanza, he anticipates: "And be ashamed." He depicts the black speaker getting stronger as his oppressors become diminished.

## Poetic Devices and Meaning

One of the remarkable facets of "I, Too, Sing America" is one we are not meant to notice at all: simple diction and phrasing. In keeping with Hughes' desire to write for regular people, he makes his speaker an ordinary person. Complicated phrasing and difficult vocabulary would not only make the speaker seem elite, they would also put the poem out of reach of the average reader.<sup>36</sup>

The simple diction and phrasing, in tandem with first-person perspective, make the poem straightforward and intimate. The speaker addresses us directly, sharing his experience and intentions without pretension. The experience of reading the poem is much like listening to a friend. Compared to Kurihara's third-person account of a situation, Hughes' first-person narration seems much more active and current—as if both the speaker and the things he is recounting are right in front of us.

Compared to Kipling's playful and mocking tone, Hughes' first-person narration is serious and sincere. The speaker of "I, Too, Sing America" proclaims: "I... Nobody'll... Besides... I," confidently and somewhat defiantly. Unlike the voiceless "They" from Kipling's poem, he is an "I" with a voice, who intends to prove to the people who look down on him that he is just as worthy of respect and opportunity as they are.

On one level, Hughes' speaker literally wants to eat in the dining room. On a deeper level, the act of eating in "I, Too, Sing America" is not literal the way it is in "We and They." Hughes uses the act of sitting and eating at a table as an extended metaphor for being a fully enfranchised citizen of the United States of America. In Hughes' time, it was common for a black person to work as a servant in a white person's home and be sent to the kitchen to eat—so Hughes' audience of both races would be able to relate to the metaphor.

At the present time, Hughes conveys, black people are not respected or given a full range of opportunities. They are forced to "eat in the kitchen," segregated from white people and denied jobs and a fair chance at education—injustices Hughes personally experienced. Rather than simply lament his people's status in the United States, Hughes encourages his audience to "laugh... eat well... And grow strong," to make the best of their circumstances until they can claim their right to equality and "be at the table." By calling the speaker "the darker brother" he reinforces the fact that society does not have reasonable cause to oppress African-Americans; they, too, are part of the American family—they, too, sing America.

The title of "I, Too, Sing America" is a different metaphor for the same concept. The speaker points out that he 'sings the same song' as white Americans—that he shares their values and desires. The title is also an allusion, a reference to another well-known artistic work. It recalls a poem by Walt

### Poetic Devices and Meaning

- ☑ First-person perspective and simple diction and phrasing create straightforwardness and intimacy
- ☑ Extended metaphor addresses the segregation and disenfranchisement of black people in the United States
- ☑ Allusion helps Hughes establish his credibility as a poet and also to underscore African-Americans' exclusion from mainstream society

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<sup>36</sup> In any case, it's refreshing to read a poem without having to balance a dictionary in the other hand. That hand should be reserved for tea. Or alpaca finger puppets.



Whitman (told you we'd get to it) called "I Hear America Singing,"<sup>37</sup> from his famous collection, *Leaves of Grass*.

Hughes' speaker insists, "I, too, sing America," implying that he and all African-Americans are currently left out from the "song," the idealized American life, that Whitman presents in his poem. Alluding to a poem by Whitman underscores just how much African-Americans are excluded from American society. Whitman is considered a people's poet, someone who writes about and gives importance to ordinary folks—as he does in "I Hear America Singing." If even Walt Whitman's poem seems to exclude African-Americans, then they truly do need poets of their own, like Hughes, to give them voices and claim their rightful place in society.

Alluding to Whitman also builds credibility—for Hughes and for his speaker. Hughes catered to a lower-class audience with his simple diction and phrasing, but he is also writing for an intellectual audience that would have been familiar with Whitman. To an intellectual reader, referencing Whitman implies two things. The first is that Hughes is on Whitman's level; though he is only an emerging black poet, he is just as relevant as an iconic white poet. By equalizing himself with Whitman—and even criticizing Whitman by noting African-Americans' exclusion from the world of "I Hear America Singing"—Hughes demands a place at the "table" of poetic greatness.



#### "I Hear America Singing" by Walt Whitman, abridged

*I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,  
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,  
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,  
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,  
...  
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,  
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows,  
robust, friendly,  
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.*

The second implication of alluding to Whitman is that Hughes and his speaker are truly American. The allusion implies that they are intimately familiar with Whitman's work—and therefore with American culture. Even as they are uniquely African-American, "the darker brother[s]," they are also simply American.

## Conclusion

Let's review what we've learned so far:

- Langston Hughes was an African-American poet and a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance. During his childhood, his grandmother inspired him to take an active role in improving the lives of African-American people.
- Hughes' poetry addressed the experiences of lower-class African-Americans' experience and incorporated their speech patterns and popular music.
- "I, Too, Sing America" acknowledges the mistreatment of African-Americans and highlights their ability to overcome adversity. It points out that African-Americans have the right to be part of the American "song" Whitman wrote of in the much older "I Hear America Singing."

<sup>37</sup> Whitman's poem also inspired the opening musical number from the somewhat unfortunate musical, *Working*—in which, in high school, one of your WSC authors may have been forced to croon about a stonemason.



## IV. Abu al-Baqa' Ibn Sharif al-Rundi: "Lament for Seville"

**We humans are nostalgic creatures.** Though we may wish life had a rewind button, we cannot rebuild fallen empires<sup>38</sup> or relive special occasions. All we can do is move on with a misty eye. For this reason, even though we don't know much at all about Abu al-Baqa Ibn Sharif al-Rundi, we can sympathize with him. All good things do seem to end, and, as he says, it is sad. Then again, not all good things end because of invading Christian soldiers.

### Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you should be able to answer the following questions:

- Who was Abu al-Baqa' Ibn Sharif al-Rundi?
- What is a *qasida*, and how does it fit into the history of Islamic poetry?
- For what purpose did al-Rundi' compose "Lament for Seville"?
- What techniques does al-Rundi use in order to appeal to the emotions of his audience?

### Abu al-Baqa' Ibn Sharif al-Rundi

Abu al-Baqa' Ibn Sharif al-Rundi did not leave much of a paper trail.<sup>39</sup> Records of his life are so scarce that we can engage in little plausible speculation about him.

We do know that al-Rundi lived during the decline of Muslim Iberia, Al-Andalus. He was born in the southwestern Spanish town of Ronda in the current province of Malaga, and he probably lived most of his life in Granada, slightly to its east.

It is thought that al-Rundi may have been a **qadi**, a Muslim judge who bases his rulings on **Shari'ah** (Islamic law). Originally, qadis were supposed to simply issue rulings on and arbitrate disputes over strictly religious matters. Over time, they accumulated other duties, such as managing inheritances, protecting orphans' property, and arranging marriages for women without guardians. A qadi had a great deal of authority; his decisions were final. Perhaps the fall of Al-Andalus affected al-Rundi all the more because he was accustomed to being in control of his world.

In addition to his poetry, al-Rundi wrote a treatise on poetics entitled *al-Wafi fi nazm al-qawafi*, another treatise on metrics, and an *urjuza* (a scholarly or religious treatise written in verse) on the laws of succession in Islam. He is probably best known, however, for the work we are to examine: a poem mourning the fall of several cities in the Murcia and Jerez provinces of Spain.

#### Biography

- Born in Ronda in southwestern Spain when Al-Andalus was in decline
- Possibly a qadi (Muslim judge)
- Died in 1285

<sup>38</sup> Apparently, the 2008-2009 curriculum repellant I sprayed around is not working.

<sup>39</sup> Not even a Facebook profile.



The cities al-Rundi mentions surrendered to the Christian Castilians in approximately 1266 C.E. According to speculation, he wrote “Lament for Seville” one year later in Marrakesh, Morocco.<sup>40</sup> The poem became very famous, and was later modified and reprinted by other poets, which made it difficult, for a while, to trace the date it was published and its author.

Al-Rundi apparently wrote “Lament for Seville” in an attempt to recruit Muslims in Northern Africa to fight off the Christian armies.<sup>41</sup> Just before then, the Nasrid ruler Muhammad ibn al-Ahmar had surrendered several cities to King Alfonso X, and the situation was looking desperate.<sup>42</sup> As history tells us, al-Rundi’s plea for help did little to stop the Spanish conquest of Iberia. Though the Nasrids resisted for another two centuries, in 1492 they surrendered to Ferdinand and Isabella.

With conquest a continual threat to Al-Andalus, why did al-Rundi choose to bypass current events and write about events that occurred roughly twenty years earlier? Seville was completely won and settled by Christians in 1248, after a 16-month siege by King Fernando. But rather than lament the present struggles in Al-Andalus, al-Rundi chose to romanticize the past and appeal to his audience’s sense of nostalgia.

Perhaps mercifully, al-Rundi did not live to see much more of the fall of Al-Andalus; he died in 1285—and would have remained unknown were it not for the poem we are about to read.

### “Lament for Seville” (1267)<sup>43</sup>

Text

1. Everything declines after reaching perfection, therefore let no man be beguiled by the sweetness of a pleasant life.

...

6. Where are the crowned kings of Yemen and where are their jewel-studded diadems and crowns?

7. Where are [the buildings] Shaddad raised in Iram and where [the empire] the Sassanians ruled in Persia?

8. Where is the gold Qārūn once possessed; where are `Ad and Shaddad and Qahtān?

9. An irrevocable decree overcame them all so that they passed away and the people came to be as though they had never existed.

...

14. For the accidents [of fortune] there is a consolation that makes them easy to bear, yet there is no consolation for what has befallen Islam.

15. An event which cannot be endured has overtaken the peninsula; one such that Uhud has

Vocabulary

**declines:** deteriorates, wanes  
**beguiled:** tricked, misled

**diadem:** a type of crown that is shaped like a headband

**Shaddad:** a mythical Arab ruler

**Sassanians:** rulers of the Sassanid Empire, 224-651 C.E.

**Qārūn:** Qur’an  
**‘Ad:** ‘Ad ibn Kin’ad, leader of the ancient Arab ‘Ad tribe

**Qahtān:** leader of the ancient inhabitants of the southern Arabian peninsula

**irrevocable:** irreversible

**consolation:** comfort  
**Uhud and Thahlān:**

DemiTranslation

1. Everything good must eventually come to an end, so, even if your life is pleasant, do not expect it to remain that way.

...

6. Where are the crowned kings of Yemen and their treasures?

7. Where is the city of Iram that Shaddad built, and where is the great Sassanid Empire?

8. Where is our gold Q’uran, and where are our powerful ancestors?

9. Fate led them all to die, and now it is as if they never existed.

...

14. Comfort usually makes people feel better about their misfortunes, but there is no comfort for what has happened to Islam.

15. The peninsula is under a siege that it cannot survive, one so terrible that it has made the mountains crumble!

<sup>40</sup> On the Zuhrite side of things...

<sup>41</sup> Al-Rundi’s: code name Mazur ben Avren.

<sup>42</sup> The Nasrids were the last Muslim rulers standing in Iberia after two centuries of Christian conquest.

<sup>43</sup> Lines are numbered in order to organize the poem for our purposes.



collapsed because of it and Thahlān has crumbled!

16. The evil eye has struck [the peninsula] in its Islam so that [the land] decreased until whole regions and districts were despoiled of [the faith]

17. Therefore ask Valencia what is the state of Murcia; and where is Jativa, and where is Jaén?

18. Where is Córdoba, the home of the sciences, and many a scholar whose rank was once lofty in it?

19. Where is Seville and the pleasures it contains, as well as its sweet river overflowing and brimming full?

20. [They are] capitals which were the pillars of the land, yet when the pillars are gone, it may no longer endure!

21. The tap of the white ablution fount weeps in despair, like a passionate lover weeping at the departure of the beloved,

22. Over dwellings emptied of Islam that were first vacated and are now inhabited by unbelief;

23. In which the mosques have become churches wherein only bells and crosses may be found.

24. Even the mihrabs weep though they are solid; even the pulpits mourn though they are wooden!

25. O you who remain heedless though you have a warning in Fate: if you are asleep, Fate is always awake!

26. And you who walk forth cheerfully while your homeland diverts you [from cares], can a homeland beguile any man after [the loss of] Seville?

27. This misfortune has caused those that preceded it to be forgotten, nor can it ever be forgotten for the length of all time!

28. O you who ride lean, thoroughbred steeds which seem like eagles in the racecourse;

29. And you who carry slender, Indian blades which seem like fires in the darkness caused by the dust cloud [of war],

30. And you who are living in luxury beyond the sea enjoying life, you who have strength and power in your homelands,

31. Have you no news of the people of Andalus, for riders have carried forth what men have said [about them]?

32. How often have the weak, who were being killed and captured while no man stirred, asked our help?

33. What means this severing of the bonds of Islam on your behalf, when you, O worshipers of God, are [our] brethren?

34. Are there no heroic souls with lofty ambitions; are there no helpers and defenders of righteousness?

mountains near the holy Islamic site of Mecca

**Jativa:** Xátiva, a city in Valencia known as a center of paper manufacturing (a technology brought there by Arabs)

**Jaén:** a city north of Granada and east of Córdoba

**lofty:** grand, admirable

**befall:** to happen to (something)

**pillar:** a column that supports a building; a stronghold

**endure:** to survive

**ablution:** ritual purification (bathing) before prayer

**vacated:** emptied, left empty of inhabitants

**mihrab:** a niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca

**pulpits:** podiums from which a religious leader leads prayers or delivers sermons

**heedless:** unaware of something

**diverts:** distracts

**beguile:** trick

**thoroughbred steeds:** horses bred to be the best at racing

**Andalus:** Al-Andalus

**stirred:** moved, arose

**brethren:** brothers, family, kin

16. The evil eye has struck Al-Andalus, causing whole regions and districts to lose faith.

17. Therefore, ask Valencia how things are in Murcia. Where are the cities of Jativa and Jaén?

18. Where is Córdoba, the home of the sciences, and the many scholars who rose to fame there?

19. Where is luxurious Seville with its overflowing river?

20. These capital cities were the strongholds of Al-Andalus, yet, now that they are gone, Al-Andalus might collapse!

21. The faucet of the white fountain where people bathe before prayer weeps in despair, as if it is mourning a lost lover.

22. It weeps because the Muslims have been driven from their homes, and now unbelievers live there.

23. The mosques have been turned into churches, with Christian objects in them.

24. The stone mosques weep, and so do the wooden podiums in them.

25. You are wrong if you think nothing bad is going to happen to you. Fate will bring you misfortune, too.

26. Just because you are comfortable in your own land does not mean you can ignore the fall of Seville.

27. The Christian Reconquista is so terrible that it is unforgettable. It seems worse than any other misfortune in history.

28. You ride the best horses, which race so fast that they seem to fly.

29. You carry the best swords, which seem like beacons of hope for the people of Al-Andalus.

30. You live in luxury across the sea,<sup>44</sup> secure and happy in your lands.

31. Haven't you heard about the plight of the people of Al-Andalus? I know you have.

32. All too often, we do not help those who are in need.

33. Why are you pretending not to care about the Muslims of Al-Andalus when you are our brothers?

34. Don't any of you want to be heroes? Won't any of you defend Al-Andalus?

<sup>44</sup> And we live over the way. Oops, wait, that's Kipling.



35. O, who will redress the humiliation of a people who were once powerful, a people whose condition injustice and tyrants have changed?  
36. Yesterday they were kings in their own homes, but today they are slaves in the land of the infidel!

**redress:** to make amends, to right a wrong

**infidel:** unbeliever

35. Who will defend the honor of Al-Andalus against injustice and tyranny?

36. In the past, the people of Al-Andalus were kings in a land they owned, but now they are slaves in the land of unbelievers.

...

42. The heart melts with sorrow at such [sights], if there is any Islam or belief in that heart!

**Islam:** peace achieved by surrendering to God; the goal as well as the name of Muslims' religious practice

...

42. Seeing these things would devastate any Muslim with a decent heart!

## Overview and Classification

“Lament for Seville” mourns the decline of Islam on the Iberian Peninsula, but it belongs to a tradition that predates Islam. Before the 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E, most Arabic poetry was not written down; the desert-dwelling **Bedouin** tribesmen who created it passed it along to their tribes’ **sha’irs**, historians, soothsayers, and propagandists rolled into one. Each sha’ir and his **rawi** (apprentice) memorized their tribe’s poems and taught them to the next generation.<sup>45</sup>

The *qit’ah*, which praised a tribe, and the *hija’*, written to insult other tribes, were very common in Pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. Occasionally, at tribal gatherings, neighboring **sha’irs** would compete in poetry mock battles.<sup>46</sup> Then Islam arrived and put a stop to all of it; Islamic leaders generally considered pre-Islamic practices a threat to the new religion and suppressed it. They did, however, preserve tribal poems as part of the budding Islamic scholastic tradition.

As the old poetic traditions sat silently on shelves, Arabic poetry evolved in style and theme. Poems discussing the harshness and simplicity of desert life fell out of fashion, mostly because the new Islamic Arab poets were bred in the luxury of court life. Two main topics emerged to fill the gap, especially in Al-Andalus: love and religion. Some poets penned odes to wine and women, while others spent their time writing verses about sin and the afterlife.<sup>47</sup> The mystical Sufi Muslims of Al-Andalus also produced many poets who saw poetry as a medium to get closer to God.

Every era has its trends, and, in the heyday of the court poets, it was fashionable to discuss **badi**, the literary complexity of poems. A poem’s *badi* included contrasts, intricate metaphors, wordplay such as puns, and allusions to religion. One thing the Arab poets had not forgotten from their tribal days was a competitive spirit, and they frequently tried to outdo one another in *badi*. Unfortunately, many aspects of *badi* are difficult to translate, so it can be hard to gauge the true skill of a poet when reading his work in another language.

### Overview

- Arabic poetry began as an oral tradition that preceded Islam
- The advent of Islam led to the decline of many of the older poetic traditions, replacing them with court poetry that discussed love and religion
- Badi* refers to the complexity of the figurative language in a poem

<sup>45</sup> After which Jean-Luc Picard memorized it and passed it on to Wesley Crusher.

<sup>46</sup> It’s like an ancient hybrid of cheerleading, mock trial, and martial arts.

<sup>47</sup> I’m willing to bet which type of poet had more fun.



Translation woes aside, “Lament for Seville” provides us with a glimpse into the thoughts of a poet whose world was literally being divided and conquered. Like some of the visual artworks you are studying, the poem is both a piece of art and a call to action. In this sense, al-Rundi is perhaps the most direct of our poets in the way he interacts with his audience. Through *badi*, he attempts to rouse local warriors to prevent the downfall of Al-Andalus. Though Al-Andalus could not be saved, al-Rundi’s contemporaries found his poem so emotionally affecting that many of them copied or wrote imitations of it.

## Form and Meter

The impressive *badi* of “Lament for Seville” operates within one of Arabic poetry’s most respected forms, the *qasida*. Taking its name from the Arabic word *qasada* (to intend or to aim for), the *qasida* is believed to have originated among Bedouins on the Arabian Peninsula. After the Persians modified and refined it, the *qasida* spread to Asia, North Africa, the Middle East, and the rest of the Muslim world. It remained popular until the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and experienced a brief revival in the 10<sup>th</sup> century thanks to a poet called al-Mutannabbi, but it declined again by the 13<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of court poetry and Persian and Turkish literature. The Bedouins, however, continued to cultivate the *qasida* even as it lost favor among other groups.

So what on Earth, then, was al-Rundi doing using an unpopular poetic form? Logic would dictate that he, attempting to rouse his contemporaries to action, would use the newest, catchiest medium possible.<sup>48</sup> Actually, *qasidas* remained popular in Al-Andalus even as they

declined in popularity elsewhere in the Arabic-speaking world. Moreover, al-Rundi was able to combine the *qasida* form with other popular poetic devices of his time in order to fulfill his poem’s dual purpose: to inspire nostalgia, and to moralize and thereby mobilize Northern African Muslims for the Iberian cause.

A traditional *qasida* comprises 60 to 100 lines, often divided into groups of two lines called couplets. Each couplet comprises two **hemistiches**, incomplete lines or thoughts punctuated to indicate a pause.<sup>49</sup> When combined, these hemistiches form a complete thought, as in line 36 of “Lament for Seville”: “Yesterday they were kings in their own homes, / but today they are slaves in the land of the infidel!” Translated into English, “Lament for Seville” loses some of the sharpness of its coupled hemistiches. Still, by observing the punctuation in English, we can discern the two-part ideas that al-Rundi put forth to his audience.

A *qasida* generally uses **monorhyme**, meaning that every line in the poem has the same end rhyme; in the case of a *qasida*, the rhyme often comes at the end of each couplet. For these reasons, a *qasida*’s rhyme scheme looks a bit like cartoon yelling: AA AA AA, etc. In the original Arabic, “Lament for

### Form and Meter

- ☑ “Lament for Seville” is a *nuniyya*, a poem rhyming on the letter *nun*, or “n”
- ☑ It is also a *qasida*, an Arabic poetic form containing various themes, comprising 60-100 couplets of hemistiches and written in monorhyme
- ☑ Sections of a *qasida*
  - nasib*, a mournful recollection of the past; a type of elegy
  - rahil*, a description of daily life, or, in this case, the events in Iberia
  - madih* (main theme), often moralizing
- ☑ “Lament for Seville” is also related to a type of medieval Latin motif called *ubi sunt* (“where are”), which was popular among poets in Al-Andalus
- ☑ Written in hemistich couplets, in pentameter, with monorhyme

<sup>48</sup> He should have organized a flash mob and then posted a video of it on YouTube.

<sup>49</sup> I wish- / I could explain... / what a hemistich is; / but- / well- / I think you get the idea.



Seville” is written in pentameter. It conforms to the monorhyme scheme, with each couplet ending in the same rhyme—an “aan” sound. This makes “Lament for Seville” a *nuniyya*, a poem that rhymes on the letter *nun* or “n.”

Like a Petrarchan sonnet, a *qasida* is made up of distinct sections with unique purposes. It moves through three stages. First is the *nasib*, a traditionally mournful section intended to grab the audience’s attention. It is an example of **elegy**, a type of poetry that laments death or loss. Al-Rundi focuses his *nasib* on fallen empires and great kings of the past.

The next section of a *qasida* is called the *rahil*. In older times, it recounted scenes from Bedouin life, such as warfare or sightings of desert creatures.<sup>50</sup> In “Lament for Seville,” the *rahil* describes the current predicament in Al-Andalus: the Christian conquest of Seville and Córdoba, the resulting fall of Islam in those cities, and the continued threat that the “infidels” pose to the Muslim population.

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### Debate it!

Resolved: That “Lament for Seville” is more about the past than it is about the future.

Concluding any good *qasida* is its main theme, an often moralizing section of praise

called the *madih*. After two sections lamenting the past and present, al-Rundi’s *madih* attempts to improve the future of Al-Andalus by calling his fellow Muslims to arms. It is both a tribute and an accusation of great proportions, praising the audience’s luxuries, horses, and weapons, but also gently reproaching them for their inaction.

“Lament for Seville” is an Arabic poem, but it happens to have a Medieval Latin cousin: *ubi sunt*, meaning “where are.” *Ubi sunt* takes its name from the Latin phrase, “*Ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt*,” or “Where are those who have been before us?” The *ubi sunt* motif focuses on mortality and the fleetingness of life, and it often assumes a nostalgic viewpoint. Even before al-Rundi begins to write the words “where are,” he is already conforming to the *ubi sunt* motif by making a general observation: “Everything declines after reaching perfection, / Fate irrevocably destroys every ample coat of mail / It unsheathes each sword only to destroy it.” Greatness and happiness, al-Rundi tells his audience, are fleeting, while destruction and woe are inevitable.

Having made this point in the first 27 couplets, he spends the rest of the poem contradicting it, calling upon his audience to prevent the destruction of Al-Andalus—which is apparently not inevitable after all. In this way, al-Rundi transforms the popular motif of *ubi sunt* into a battle cry, encouraging his fellow Muslims to fight so bravely as to overcome fate.<sup>51</sup>

Al-Rundi was by no means the first Andalusian Muslim poet to incorporate *ubi sunt* into his work. The motif made its way to the Iberian Peninsula centuries earlier, and became a popular theme for Muslim poets in a world of Christian conquest.

## Poetic Devices and Meaning

The courtly poets of Al-Andalus loved *qasidas*, enjoyed *ubi sunt*, and were also fans of *takrār*. Known in English as **anaphora**, *takrār* is the technique of beginning multiple lines with the same phrase in order to emphasize a main point. In “Lament for Seville,” al-Rundi combines *takrār* with *ubi sunt* so that many lines begin with the phrases “where are” and “where is.” Repeating these rhetorical questions forces the audience to mentally answer them: all the places al-Rundi asks about have fallen.

---

<sup>50</sup> Such as, no doubt, Tusken Raiders.

<sup>51</sup> When life gives you laments, make lament-ade?



The *takrār* hammers home al-Rundi's main theme—that the Arab world's greatness is in jeopardy—and (hopefully) inspires his audience to intervene.<sup>52</sup>

A technique called **apostrophe**<sup>53</sup> helps al-Rundi touch his audience's emotions. In apostrophe, which means “turning away,” the speaker shifts his attention to a new audience, one that cannot answer him. In “Lament for Seville,” al-Rundi directly confronts the North African Muslims for whom he intended the poem. Using the time-tested strategy of guilt, he cries: “O you who remain heedless... And you who walk forth cheerfully... O you who ride lean, thoroughbred steeds... And you who live in luxury beyond the sea enjoying life.”

In repeating “O you...” al-Rundi seems to plead with his audience. Each couplet that begins this way, reminds them how lucky they are and what great resources they possess for war against the Christians. If his strategy works, they will mount their pedigreed horses, unsheathe their “Indian blades,” and invest in a few shipyards in order to sail to the aid of their “brethren.”

“Lament for Seville” also contains a compelling comparison between the past and present. After al-Rundi has lamented a few ugly universal truths in couplets 1-5, he launches into an array of historical and mythological allusions that evoke past glory. Great leaders, from Ibn Dhi Yazan to Solomon, pepper couplets 5-15. So do references to the powerful Achaemenid (Darius I) and Sassanid Empires, not to mention imposing landmarks such as Iram, Ghumdān, Uhud and Thahlān.

As soon as al-Rundi finishes lauding the ancient past he compares it to more recent times. From the Sassanids and Iram, he transports us to Valencia, Murcia, Jativa, and Jaén. He returns to the *ubi sunt* motif that earlier described ancient Arabian cities, thus comparing them to the cities of Al-Andalus. In addition to giving the Andalusian cities an elevated, mythical status, the comparison also underscores the danger Al-Andalus is facing. Al-Rundi implies that if his brethren don't act quickly, the cities of Al-Andalus will become mere memories, just like the Achaemenid and Sassanid Empires.

The allusions to heroes like 'Ad and Chosroes convey a second message to al-Rundi's audience: “If you help save these exalted places in Al-Andalus, you can become a hero for all time.” Al-Rundi makes this case more directly in couplet 34 when he asks: “Are there no heroic souls with lofty ambitions; are there no helpers and defenders of righteousness?” Out of respect to his audience, he is passive with them, asking rather than demanding.

He is not gentle, though. Al-Rundi does not just tug the heartstrings of his audience; he yanks. The *badi* of “Lament for Seville,” including simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and personification, enhances the poem's emotional appeal, its **pathos**. The similes in couplets 28-9, for example, compliment the audience. Al-Rundi praises the horses by comparing them to eagles and the

### Poetic Devices and Meaning

- ☑ The *badi* (complexity) of “Lament for Seville” includes anaphora, apostrophe, simile, metaphor, metonymy, and personification
- ☑ The *badi* also includes a main comparison, between the past and the present, and a main contrast, between the comfort of the reader and the suffering of the Muslims of Al-Andalus
- ☑ Poetic devices in the poem create pathos (emotional appeal), inspiring guilt and sympathy in the audience and encouraging them to intervene on the behalf of Al-Andalus
- ☑ Depending on the device he is using in a particular section of verse, al-Rundi makes the scale of loss and suffering in Al-Andalus seem alternately personal and colossal

<sup>52</sup> It is the Medieval Arabic version of a charity telethon: “pledge only 10,000 troops on horseback, and you'll get this charming special edition CD: *Greatest hits of Al-Andalus*.”

<sup>53</sup> Not the same as the punctuation mark called an apostrophe, which is often misunderstood among the sign-making public. For example, today I walked by a display of flowers marked, “Rose's: \$10.00.” I had to wonder who Rose was and whether she was aware these people were selling her flowers.



swords by comparing them to beacons of hope. If his audience feels respected and praised, perhaps they will be more likely to intervene on behalf of Al-Andalus.

Al-Rundi's use of personification also enhances the poem's pathos. In couplets 21 and 24, respectively, he says that the ablution fount and *mihrabs* weep, as if they are distraught human beings. Ascribing sorrow to these objects is a dramatic way to make the audience feel guilty about the state of Islam in Iberia. Islam is suffering so much, he says, that even the inanimate objects used in prayer are crying. If the audience does not sympathize with the people of Al-Andalus, perhaps they will sympathize with the objects they themselves use in daily prayer.<sup>54</sup>

Al-Rundi also uses personification to make the plight of Al-Andalus seem larger than life. In couplets 17 and 22, he uses **metonymy**, substituting the name of a concept or thing for something else closely related to it.<sup>55</sup> Rather than write: "Ask the people of Valencia what is the state of Murcia," al-Rundi writes: "Ask Valencia what is the state of Murcia." Rather than describe "dwellings emptied of Muslims ... now inhabited by unbelievers," he describes "dwellings emptied of Islam ... now inhabited by unbelief."

The metonymy makes Valencia and Murcia seem like icons, rather than mere cities. They sound almost mythical, like the places al-Rundi mentions earlier in the poem. It is not just cities that are at stake; it is an entire empire. Using "Islam" as a metonymy for Muslims achieves a similar purpose. It focuses the audience's attention away from individual people and onto the institution of Islam. It is not just Muslims who are in danger; it is Islam itself.

Al-Rundi ends "Lament for Seville" with one last plea to his audience. He says, "The heart melts with sorrow at such [sights], if there is any Islam or belief in that heart!" Again, he is being passive or indirect with his audience. Rather than accuse them of being heartless, he points out that any good Muslim would be upset over the plight of Islam in Al-Andalus. Rather than tell them to intervene, al-Rundi implies that it would be unethical for them *not* to intervene. By being indirect, al-Rundi is being respectful. He pleads forcefully with them, but he does not directly demand anything of them.

In *The Lions of Al-Rassan*, author Guy Gavriel Kay includes a poem inspired by "Lament for Seville." Mazur ben Avren is its poet, disguised as a greyhound on the night of Carnival. Just as al-Rundi laments the fall of Seville and the fate of Al-Andalus, Mazur meditates on the decline of Silvenes and ponders the fate of Al-Rassan.

In writing this poem, Kay mimics some of al-Rundi's poetic devices, including the *ubi sunt* motif. The poem asks: "What has become of Silvenes? ... Where is the palace whence the khalifs of all-fame / Thundered forth with armies?" It uses anaphora and mimics al-Rundi's statement, "Therefore ask Valencia what is the state of Murcia..." in the lines that begin, "Ask of ourselves ... Ask of the river ... Ask of the wine..." Kay also draws on the theme of lost glory, as al-Rundi does in "Lament for Seville." He praises Silvenes for its military greatness, powerful rulers, culture, and luxuries.

In purpose and message, however, the poem in *The Lions of Al-Rassan* stands apart. Mazur asks the Zuhrites to fight the Jaddites, as al-Rundi asks Northern African Muslims to fight the Christians, but he does so in a separate letter. In the poem, he does not mention the Jaddites at all. Rather, he

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<sup>54</sup> There's another implication for the audience in there, too: if even the stone objects are weeping over this, you're really a jerk if it doesn't upset you.

<sup>55</sup> For example, when you hear that Buckingham Palace has issued a statement, it is really the Queen who has done so. \ Unless the palace has learned how to talk, in which case, run for your life.



focuses on the divided state of Al-Rassan since the fall of Silvenes, and suggests that Ragosa is the heart of Al-Rassan.

In order to praise Ragosa, Mazur denigrates Cartada. He recites: “Ask in stern-walled Cartada for news of Silvenes / But ask here in Ragosa about Al-Rassan.” He suggests that, in Cartada, Almalik II is trying—but failing—to reestablish the glory of Silvenes, while in Ragosa, Badir is building a better future for Al-Rassan. Rather than a call to arms, his poem is a call for people to appreciate the integrity and potential of Ragosa and Al-Rassan.

## Conclusion

Let’s review what we’ve learned in this section:

- Little is known of al-Rundi, other than the fact that he was born in Al-Andalus and probably wrote “Lament for Seville” in Marrakesh. He may also have been a *qadi*.
- The forms and themes of Arabic poetry date back to the Pre-Islamic tribal period, in which poetry was an oral tradition transmitted by sha’irs and rawis. “Lament for Seville” is a *qasida*, a three-part poem with couplets of hemistiches. It is written in pentameter and uses monorhyme.
- “Lament for Seville” employs the motif of *ubi sunt* to inspire nostalgia, remark on the fleeting nature of joy and greatness, and point out the inevitability of woe and destruction. Its pathos is intended to rouse its audience, Northern African Muslims, to wage war against the Christians overtaking Al-Andalus.
- The *badi* of “Lament for Seville” features a main comparison between the ancient past and the present, and a main contrast, between the comfort of the audience and the suffering of the Muslims of Al-Andalus.
- The poem in *The Lions of Al-Rassan* mimics “Lament for Seville” in some of its themes and poetic devices, it has a different purpose and message. Instead of urging the Zuhrites to sail to the aid of Al-Rassan, it highlights the division between Cartada and Ragosa and encourages people to appreciate Ragosa—the heart of Al-Rassan.



## V. Directed Research Area: Emily Dickinson & Wislawa Szymborska

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**Guides are a fine invention for those who memorize,**  
but research is more prudent when you hope to grow wise.

For the first four poets, we have given you most of what you need to know for the World Scholar's Cup. For the last two, you will need to go online (or to libraries) and learn more about their lives and careers. Then, spend some time analyzing their poems, as printed below. In a sense, this is more Directed Analysis than Directed Research. What literary devices do they use? Do they have rhyme schemes? What message are they trying to convey? Ask yourself how they and their works connect to the theme of a world divided.

First, Emily Dickinson:

*Faith is a fine invention  
When gentlemen can see  
But microscopes are prudent  
In an emergency.*

What aspect of a world divided is the focus of this short poem?

The second directed research poet, Wislawa Szymborska, is perhaps more of a challenge: she is still alive, and, except perhaps in Poland, more obscure. Focus more on her work below—"Conversation with a Stone"—and less on her biography. You should expect questions on "Conversation with a Stone" only at the World Finals.

- 1 | *I knock at the stone's front door.*
- 2 | *"It's only me, let me come in.*
- 3 | *I want to enter your insides,*
- 4 | *have a look round,*
- 5 | *breathe my fill of you."*
  
- 6 | *"Go away," says the stone.*
- 7 | *"I'm shut tight.*
- 8 | *Even if you break me to pieces,*
- 9 | *we'll all still be closed.*
- 10 | *You can grind us to sand,*
- 11 | *we still won't let you in."*
  
- 12 | *I knock at the stone's front door.*
- 13 | *"It's only me, let me come in.*
- 14 | *I've come out of pure curiosity.*
- 15 | *Only life can quench it.*
- 16 | *I mean to stroll through your palace,*
- 17 | *then go calling on a leaf, a drop of water.*
- 18 | *I don't have much time.*
- 19 | *My mortality should touch you."*



20 | *"I'm made of stone," says the stone,*  
21 | *"and must therefore keep a straight face.*  
22 | *Go away.*  
23 | *I don't have the muscles to laugh."*  
24 | *I knock at the stone's front door.*  
25 | *"It's only me, let me come in.*  
26 | *I hear you have great empty halls inside you,*  
27 | *unseen, their beauty in vain,*  
28 | *soundless, not echoing anyone's steps.*  
29 | *Admit you don't know them well yourself."*

30 | *"Great and empty, true enough," says the stone,*  
31 | *"but there isn't any room.*  
32 | *Beautiful, perhaps, but not to the taste*  
33 | *of your poor senses.*  
34 | *You may get to know me, but you'll never know me through.*  
35 | *My whole surface is turned toward you,*  
36 | *all my insides turned away."*

37 | *I knock at the stone's front door.*  
38 | *"It's only me, let me come in.*  
39 | *I don't seek refuge for eternity.*  
40 | *I'm not unhappy.*  
41 | *I'm not homeless.*  
42 | *My world is worth returning to.*  
43 | *I'll enter and exit empty-handed.*  
44 | *And my proof I was there*  
45 | *will be only words,*  
46 | *which no one will believe."*

47 | *"You shall not enter," says the stone.*  
48 | *"You lack the sense of taking part.*  
49 | *No other sense can make up for your missing sense of taking part.*  
50 | *Even sight heightened to become all-seeing*  
51 | *will do you no good without a sense of taking part.*  
52 | *You shall not enter, you have only a sense of what that sense should be,*  
53 | *only its seed, imagination."*

54 | *I knock at the stone's front door.*  
55 | *"It's only me, let me come in.*  
56 | *I haven't got two thousand centuries,*  
57 | *so let me come under your roof."*

58 | *"If you don't believe me," says the stone,*  
59 | *"just ask the leaf, it will tell you the same.*  
60 | *Ask a drop of water, it will say what the leaf has said.*  
61 | *And, finally, ask a hair from your own head.*  
62 | *I am bursting with laughter, yes, laughter, vast laughter,*  
63 | *although I don't know how to laugh."*



- 64 | *I knock at the stone's front door.*  
65 | *"It's only me, let me come in."*  
66 | *"I don't have a door," says the stone.*

Some specific questions to consider:

Is a broken stone still a stone?

How are dialogue and persuasion used in the poem?

Identify personification, irony, and paradox in the poem.

How is the world of the stone divided from that of the poet?

How might the leaf or the droplet of water behave differently than the stone?



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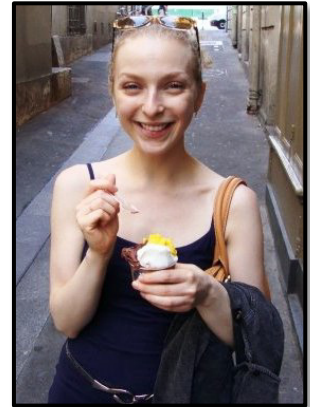
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## About the Authors

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**Tania Asnes** graduated from Barnard College in 2005 with a B.A. in English. While studying in the creative writing program, Tania came to enjoy having her own poetry dissected, cut to shreds, run over with a steamroller, and occasionally praised. A speaker of Russian, rusty Spanish, and rustier Hebrew, Tania is currently taking a crash course in French on her iPod in order to spend six months in Paris. So far, her favorite French word is “pamplemousse,” which means “grapefruit.” When she is not writing, editing, learning languages, or building alpaca-proof fences around her desk (the *vicugna pacos* is known to eat drafts in progress), Tania likes to cook and read works of science-related nonfiction. Tania thanks her sister for ‘translating’ the rhyme scheme of “Lament for Seville.”



**Aisha Down** aspires one day to be exactly like Don Quixote, except with a spaceship and a pet Tribble. Barring this, she would like to become a traveling poet-philosopher. When Aisha is not writing for the World Scholar’s Cup, attending Harvard, or taking gap years in Southeast Asia, she engages in behavior typical of an aspiring philosopher—e.g. walking while talking to herself and working at the customer service desk at a local grocery store, where she has (so far) helped a 9-year-old run away from home, broken the one hour photo lab, and started a “Bring your Tribble to Work” day.



## About the Editor

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**Daniel Berdichevsky** is incompetent at many things. He has no sense of rhythm. He cannot dance. He cannot sing, hum, clap, or whistle. He cannot beat an egg correctly. He cannot whisper without being overheard. He cannot speak Spanish with a Spanish accent despite Spanish being his first language. He cannot tie his shoes so they stay tied or put harnesses on his puppies. He cannot remember where he left things, especially important things or things containing dollar bills. He cannot effectively close an umbrella or consistently close a cabinet door. He has never beaten his girlfriend at Scrabble<sup>56</sup> or any other game except billiards, which is a man-game anyway.



He is a [sad panda](#).

You can contact Daniel at [dan@scholarscup.org](mailto:dan@scholarscup.org) or find him on Facebook.

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<sup>56</sup> This is no longer accurate as of December 26, 2009.