

**University of Iowa Portfolio  
Writing Samples**

**Courses from 2015-2019**

**Melissa Tropa**

*Pub. 8/25/2019*

### This Portfolio

The following writing samples are real assignments Melissa Trepá completed during her undergraduate studies from the University of Iowa.

Material ranges from analytical assessments to creative nonfiction prose to research based literary analysis during her time as an English major, Theatre Arts minor, and Fundraising and Philanthropy participant at Iowa. For additional creative writing see other portfolio file.

She chose the following writing samples because they reflect her ability from her coursework from a variety of skillsets from creative to analytical skills. She hopes these materials are helpful, however, reminds viewers that the pieces do not reflect all of Trepá's studies at Iowa, but merely represent a sample of what she studied. She hopes you enjoy, thank you.

### Table of Contents

Foundations of Creative Writing.....	3
Art of Performance .....	5
Works Cited.....	10
American Poetry .....	11
Works Cited.....	21
American Poetry .....	22
Works Cited.....	33

Foundations of Creative Writing  
Presented Framed by remembered past

### Winter fresh Gum

The clouds are often grey in my memory, when I think about you. However, I am deceiving myself because I know the sun had shined on more than one occasion over those thirteen years. I try to bring myself to remember the memories of that time and place like that of a children's story.

Where joy lingers between lines and rhyming phrases, and where no pain truly exists. In these novels, there are main characters, protagonists and antagonists.

I find my way through the book, and I begin to adore the funny animals and daydream about the princesses. As a child, the warmth of your arms sedated me from daytime antics and overwhelming slumber never failed to take me.

How I wish the grey clouds in my mind could stop so I could be warmed from those memories, from the radiating warmth of the sun on my face.

I am in a book store picking my books for the semester, and I think of you out of the blue. You're tree trucks for calves, your belting chuckle echoes in my mind so sharply I turn around but the space is silent.

Grey shadows follow me and I feel fading and fleeting aches as I prouse through the place. I do not find what I am looking for, I knew walking in I wouldn't.

As I leave the store, the wind picks me up and practically carries me out onto the street sidewalk. Gushes of blasting wind particles tickle as the hairs on my face swirl all around and graze me in a kiss.

With each gust of movement in the atmosphere, I can still smell winter fresh gum. Like the Lilly's that bloom in spring, it is a constant sensation at the tip of my nose. I feel the brisk afternoon air, and mouthwash follows the aroma.

I see posters on my walk home, they advertise for old spice aftershave and I find it hard to stay moving forward in a straight line. The path to you was never straight. The scent of you clouding my vision gives me a headache.

Unlike mouthwash and perfume, you never made me feel clean or fresh. No matter how many times I would brush my teeth before the sun went down, I could not feel the food escape between the creases of my teeth.

You were like that, always there even when left untouched, and I could not escape you from my mind.

A father is supposed to bring light to every storm, carry strength in his children's weaknesses. But how are you supposed to feel strong when you see your father be weak in life with you, and you are forced to be so damn strong?

I like to pretend you are dead sometimes, it makes it easier pretending you loved either my sister or I than knowing you chose to die in the middle of life.

The cowards' way out, you are still breathing somewhere, with your fresh minty breath and flossed pearly whites. There is nothing clean about who you are or what you've done. And no amount of winter fresh gum could possibly cleanse you.

## Art of Performance

### Reflection of the Arts in Performance: “Meditating on the Mediums

“Art in Performance.” The phrase itself has an artistic ring to it, evoking a sense of curiosity and wonder inside me from the moment the course began. Since my enrollment in Art in Performance, along with the opportunity to be again acquainted with Megan Gogerty herself, I knew the course and its contents would forever affect me. According to University of Iowa course syllabus created by Professor Megan Gogerty, the course aims to “...engage with a variety of performing art works and think critically about them” and hopes to “...explore the ways the arts have and continue to revolutionize how we see and experience the world” (Gogerty). This engagement and exploration described after the courses completion has affirmed the goals and exceeded expectations as I engaged myself as a student and a necessary player in the performance in the arts and its interpretations.

Initially in the course, my personal experience with the arts was from the perspective of the performer and artist, rather than the audience and observer. I had background in both technical crew and acting in the theater community, was an artist and writer, and used to dance as a young child through my early teenage years. Expectations for performances were extremely high as I placed myself in their point of view, trying to determine the difference in my decisions verses those of the performers rather than letting the art be. I found it especially difficult to play the role of audience member and as a result naturally tried to impose personal narratives on works to interpret larger meanings. Throughout the course I struggled with this, even in the final performances. However, the difference from the start of the course to the end, was within my

own mindfulness of this larger outer frame which was imposing on my influence and experience of the performances. As the shows continued on, I was more aware and tried harder to engage in the inner frames and codes being expressed to me, although I was aware of my own outer frames influences still affecting me. Mindfully, I meditated on the mediums more and more often from a place of the audience's role, rather than performer and tried my best to overcome my desire to create narratives in my own mind.

These tendencies were the result of my outer frame which therefore influenced the way the inner frame of the performance was influencing me and consequently effected the codes being expressed by the performers for their intended message. This message being for an intended audience and its gatekeepers. I was surprised to learn that not all performances have me as their intended audience as we engaged in class discussions, but was made aware of how performances create codes to send a message to these gatekeepers and intended audience members to evoke a specific message or express various art forms. However, often times the shows were for me and other college students along with the Iowa City community of adults who also valued and enjoyed the arts which was very comforting and welcoming.

Several pieces come to mind where I had a specifically difficult time not narrating my own narrative or inflicting my own experience in the arts onto the works. The first performance being, the "Museum Field Trip" of the art in the Iowa Memorial Union. As an artist and current English major, I often tried to recognize symbolism and the intentions of the artist, that is, their codes and over codes. However, in doing so, I inflicted my own ideas where there may or may not have been intended. For example, the piece which I dissected on the "Two Flags" piece in the museum, was black and white with scratches on the flags that mirrored each other. The scratches could've simply been a mistake or intentional, however, I interpreted those scratches to

represent the youth of American society and the oppression and imperfection of the country which led me to think about today's oppressions rather than those of the piece's era. Creating narrative is not bad, however, it can take away from the art being dissected if not carefully made aware influencing frame of mind.

Throughout the course, I was especially critical of the plays because of my close love for the theater and my own well known experience, therefore affecting my outer frame onto the inner frame. I both intrigued and disappointed by "The Taming", "Rome Sweet Rome", and "Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike." Most of the disappointment being from a theater standpoint. In "The Taming" and "Rome Sweet Rome" amongst some of the messages being articulated politically, I was curious to why they chose to omit many crew members, and as a crew member myself, identified that the show did not perhaps value crew member as much, even when the show could have easily just been trying to save space or resources. In the view of actor and theater minor outer frames, I was frustrated by the way "Rome Sweet Rome" felt it was incomplete in its arguments, and the limited view of the liberal in "The Taming" despite being aware later on in discussion of the dramatical reason for creating that negative perception. I wondered why "Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike" was acted out so dramatically, and felt it took away from the comedy rather than adding to it, from a perspective of a person with theater backgrounds. These outer frame obstacles also applied when watching the "Dance Gala" as a former dancer, which I overcame as well.

Of the classes exposed performances, I was fascinated and benefitted from all of them, but felt a few to be most rewarding and effective in opening my mind to the world and the arts. "The Asian Project", "Every Brilliant Thing", Samuel Becket's play, and my own research on gender and dance within our choreography project all influenced me on a larger scale. All of

these performances and projects are different, and I think this speaks to my growth as a student and intended audience member of the course. Whether it was a play, a scene from a film, or project, it was through the dissection and interpretation that I fell most in love with the class and performances. Being willing to be open minded to varying art forms is another spot in which I grew exponentially and benefitted from greatly as an lover of the arts.

As art does, it makes you question your thoughts and understandings of the world. In “The Asia Project” the piece was slam poetry, and the messages resonated me as an English major, and within the poets own stories which reflected my personal experiences with loss and cancer. In “Every Brilliant Thing,” I had never seen a one man show before and was enticed by the way that the show utilized the audience as a form of code and to inflict emotional responses to the piece. In the Becket exercise which taught us reception theory, I was excited to be the leader of the group and to try to dissect the intentions of the inner frame through the codes and over codes. Dangerously bordering my own created narratives, it helped me to more effectively interpret the artist’s potential intensions or codes rather than inflicting my own, although tempting. This dissection was later fueled in my research for gender studies and contact improv, and proved to be effective in realizing a passion for research I didn’t realize I had. Through this course, I was connected with people in the department and given opportunities, such as those to explore the field with dramaturgy work for an incredible gallery piece called “Girl”.

Additionally, I was influenced by the way art speaks about society as history is occurring in real time today. Whether it be the infamous Hamilton, or “The Taming” art is also used as way to express political and historical truths, and it made me appreciate art even more, especially given this years’ election and crisis in our society divided in many ways. Art has so many uses, from just being in order cultivate questions, to making statements about society in hopes of



shaping and influencing it. I have come to appreciate art from all perspectives, both audience and artist, and have grown even more grateful in the process.

Through the engagement of a variety of works of art in performance, I have critically interpreted and been influenced by art which has exceeded my expectations of the course. I have a new perspective on art in performance and the way in which I view the world along with how I interact with the art surrounding society. Through my own outer frames, I was influenced by the inner works in a unique way, and as an intended audience gained new perspectives by the performances and how they expressed certain view-points through codes, engaging me into the work and the world and opening my mind simultaneously. By meditating on these mediums, I have grown as an artist and student and have forever been affected by the contents of this course which I expect to carry with me throughout the rest of my life. Never forgetting the artistic charm of the class, "The Art in Performance" I will carry this course with me and hold it precious with admiration.

## Works Cited

Gogerty, Megan. "Arts in Performance: THTR: 1412:0001 Syllabus."

*Https://uiowa.instructure.com*. ICON: University of Iowa Canvas Syllabus, 24 Aug.

2016. Web. 07 Dec. 2016.

<<https://uiowa.instructure.com/courses/2571/assignments/syllabus>>.

## American Poetry

Dissecting Disordered Afflictions:

Examining Emily Dickinson's poetics through the lens of personal illness

Professor Blake Bronson-Bartlett

### American Poetry

"Unit, like Death, for Whom? / True, like the Tomb, who tells no secret" (Johnson 94). In the Thomas H. Johnson version of Emily Dickinson collection of poetry, the *Final Harvest*, Emily Dickinson uses her common tried and true tactic of rhetorical questioning to begin a poem seemingly about death, from poem 158. However, there appears to be so much more between the lines of text like much of Dickinson's writing often entails. It is through the smart syntactical techniques of Emily Dickinson that her poetry remains available to numerous interpretations through clear textual evidence. Which is why Emily Dickinson's techniques of ambiguity and syntactical intention make her so very popular to this day, as seen by the large archive of scholarly study done on her work.

Poetry appears as a literary artform, to rely on the subjectivity of its form to gain intrigue and interest from the reader, however, through the biographical knowledge of Dickinson's life, the work of her writing becomes that much more in depth for interpretation than what is blatantly on the surface. Literature, consequently, must rely on an authors' personal biography to assist in the textual interpretation of the reader for proper analysis of textual readings of poetry. This is especially true then for the style of an innovative writer like Emily Dickinson where her illnesses had so much influence over her life and work. Therefore, it is undeniable that Emily Dickinson's use of unique syntactical techniques in her work directly result from her personal experience

with illness throughout her life, where poems like, “Unit, like Death, for Whom”, poem 158, remain an exemplification of this significant influence.

Emily Dickinson was a renowned writer for her many manuscripts documented and dissected across scholarly discourse for the interpretation of many who idolized and admired her, especially of course, after her death. What makes Dickinson especially intriguing however, is in fact, her biographical background which influenced her writing and syntactical style since much of her work was published after she was no longer living. Dickinson had a particularly unique life with a set of hardships, especially from the impact of various illness which limited her life but impacted her work. From m-dashes, to capitalization in unexpected places, as well as her shorter more hymnal style and influences, Dickinson used her ambiguous yet at times bold voice and syntactical style to say what often cannot be put into words about life in her writing. That is that writing can make an impact even when one’s life does not appear to be doing so while you’re alive. Dickinson reiterates this sensation through the way in which she cultivated her poetry, how it was published after her death through many completed collections, the topics of her poetry, as well as the ways she chose to write, established in her biography.

Dickinson’s biography from the *Final Harvest*, mentions Dickinson’s early life and background. Emily Dickinson grew up in Massachusetts and by all accounts came from a “...well respected lawyer Edward Dickinson, and his wife Emily Norcross Dickinson” or in other words, a well-established family (Johnson v). However, despite siblings, parents, and a relatively simple life in Massachusetts, Dickinson used writing to articulate what was harder for her to do in real life, often, writing to her literary mentor and confidant Thomas Wentworth Higginson among others (Johnson vii). Dickinson would become dependent on her writing to make sense of the world and herself, as often writers do. However according to Thomas H.

Johnson's version of Dickinson's poetry in the *Final Harvest*, part of what made Dickinson's writing so iconic is the way she viewed the power of writing herself. She described her love for it by saying in a conversation with Higginson, "A Word made Flesh is seldom/And tremblingly partook...A word that breathes distinctly/ Has not the power to die" Later saying, "Is there any act, more blessed than the divine descent, the voluntary stooping of immanence, a reach the ear and heart of the creature, to make the Word live?" (Johnson vii). Dickinson in her most pure expression for the love of the written word, utilizes life and death notably in her explanation, as if words breath and live better than she does.

In the first line, when stating, "A Word made Flesh is seldom" she articulates that the word is not like the flesh or living but later describes it with personification when she says, "A word that breathes distinctly/Has not the power to die". In this sense, Dickinson is saying that writing must come alive through the words despite words not being literal flesh. She capitalizes, in Johnsons' edition that is, the word Flesh and Word, emphasizing the body, heart, ear, all influence the word when feeling or hearing it and experiencing poetry, while in contrast, the body in her case, is less than inclined to be cooperative while she was living. It also strikes the reader as ironic to note her descending description in these lines of verse, with a "divine descent" and intent to make the "Word live". This descent could be interpreted as a reference to the decline of the living where only then does the truth feel eminent about the meaning of life, just as the word seems to articulate in its descent to make the word live on the page. Otherwise, this divine descent could be a reference to her common use of strong ambiguity at the start of lines of her work until the literature descends on the page further into clarity the farther down the poem the reader goes. All of which is to inform us, that the life of literature has a major influence on

Dickinson's work, in the same way life itself was on the mind of those with long chronic illnesses that Emily Dickinson endured in her life.

What exactly did Dickinson have regarding ailments or illness then specifically, and what were the norms of women of her time which she both followed and denied in her personal path in life? It appears many experiences made their impact towards an unconventional life, which can then be reflected in Dickinson's poetry as well, however, her illnesses, had the most influence. According to Norbert Hirschhorn and Polly Longworth of the *New England Quarterly* who discuss "*Medicine Posthumous*" of Emily Dickinson, Emily Dickinson is often referenced to her two major ailments documented in various biographies, "...the difficulties of her eyes during the early to mid-1860's and her final illness, labeled Bright's disease, a kidney dysfunction, by her physician on the 1886 death certificate." (Hirschhorn and Longworth 299). Which speak on the illnesses Dickinson endured, how they were treated or what was known about them at the time, and how she wrote about it in letters to friends and mentors during the time of her experiences.

According to Hirschhorn and Longworth, Dickinson despite her eye illness, she remained adamant in her writing, revealing her character as an individual and towards her work. In one of her letters, letter 290, it is documented that she writes "Can you render my Pencil? The physician has taken away my Pen" and continued to write poetry against her doctor's wishes, despite having to switch from ink to pencil for her eye sight's sake after 1863 (Hirschhorn and Longworth 302). In Dickinson's letter 302, she writes, according to Hirschhorn and Longworth, that her family are kind but that they, "...but "cannot see why I don't get well". This makes me think I am long sick, and this takes the ache to my eyes..." (Hirschhorn and Longworth 303). It is known as well that Dickinson also had an associated "psychosomatic

link” of mental instability to her eye condition through the distress that the disease caused.

Dickinson’s eyes were ridden with the disease “iritis/uveitis” that never seemed to truly end and impacted her emotions greatly (Hirschhorn and Longworth 306). In addition to this condition, she then was impacted later in life by distress near her other more final illness when relatives began dying in her life. As Dickinson put it herself in her letter 939, “The Dying’s have been too deep for me”, which occurred around 1884 in her life where many deaths seemed to happen one after the next (Hirschhorn and Longworth 310). In addition, this is when Dickinson became ill with not only ailments at the distress of her family members death towards the end of her life, but the presence of “Bright’s disease”, which lasted years, and according to the diagnosis was a collection of illnesses involving inflammation of the kidney and scarring, or nephritis, with secondary effects in other organs. Effects included the enlargement of the heart, swelling of the limbs, kidney failure, hypertension, apoplexy (stroke), and others (Hirschhorn and Longworth 312). This signifies just how far Dickinson had been deteriorating knowingly or unknowingly over the course of her life. Such physical and emotional distress therefore had their impact on her writing, as it remained her way of bringing the “Word to life”, as she mentions to Higginson in earlier life and writing career.

Dickinson’s poem, “Unit, like Death, for Whom?” was a particularly interesting poem to dissect, to better align illness as influence of Dickinson’s intentions for her poetry, because of the ways Dickinson remained true to the form of her usual style, as well as the ways she refrained from it which impacted the meaning of the work” (Johnson 94). While Dickinson followed similar patterns of her poetics like hymnal verse and meter amongst other common practice, it was when her style seems the most vague and ambiguous, that the interpretation of the line seems almost especially difficult to narrow into a specific narrative. However, it appears that all the

Dickinson's iconic modes of style come into play in this particular poem specifically, such as the m-dashes, the metaphors, the existential tone, remaining vague, ending on a contemplative note in the final line, while also derailing from some usual rhythms and methods in the way her dashes are executed, and the message that seems to be formed.

Regarding the poem, it remains a theme on the topic of death, however, it also feels like it is a call to a bit on religion, and a bit on poetry and voice itself, which all incorporate themselves into the themes of this work. It is most prevalent with the line "Who tells no secret/Told to Him", where the "H" in "Him" is capitalized, implying a God figure potentially, while also remaining ambiguous enough to remain more contemplative of a more personal reflection on death's impact, or rather life's impact as well. Just as Dickinson often did in her chronic states of illness presumably. This poem in particular has many interpretations because of its ambiguity and odd rhythm using m-dashes. However, being paired in the selections of Dickinson's poems in Johnson's translation next to works at the time of the civil war with other continual topics of death for instance does help narrow the assumptions that can be derived from the text. However, to what extent death is being analyzed, that is up for consideration. This, therefore makes it seem safe to assume that Dickinson's piece may relate to death when using words like "tomb" "dead" "the dying" "the coy dead" all being mentioned. However, to what extent that death is explored is up to the interpretation of the reader onto the text since poetics, and speech itself take a turn for reflection in this piece. More directly, this piece could be another comment on the civil war, being published in 1862, with words like "the bearer and the borne" and "unit, like death, for whom" which may be the north and south in battle, and the part which mentions "one seat" could be the predicted "winner of the war", while the "babbler and bohea" may be comments on how the war was discussed at the time with regard to gossiping. However,



a broader, larger, existential take on the existence of life, and the value of voice could also be a larger broader interpretation which uses themes like death and religion to navigate the methodology of the piece.

For example, by using larger unending phrasing like “the Tomb” instead of specifying the tomb or saying, “The Living-tell-/The Dying-but a Syllable” Dickinson seems to be interpreting the voice, that at the end is “A tremor just, that All’s not sure”. As if to say, one may think they know about God, heaven, and the “ticket” that is given to heaven, but no one knows for sure and has doubts. This is referenced in the second to last line that states, “But Gravity-and Expectation-and Fear-“, which helps to establish a different take than simply the dying and the dead. In addition, the dashes place themselves even more than normally expected of the other poems Dickinson writes between single words along with being at the end of lines, to enhance the reflective nature of the piece, therefore the conversation feels larger than just death, but on existence itself, in this instance.

Regarding the other hundreds of poems that Dickinson wrote in her time, what stands out most aside from her ailments she experienced is her lyric and hybrid styles and practices of her writing, especially in her life between 1830-1886, where, like her life, the work remained unconventional and outside the norm. Her style emulates her decaying body of illness where like a sick body, her lines almost never exceed into lengthy territory, like that of a shorter life for the ill, while her ambiguity itself in the text, is like the unknown reason for her eye sight issues and kidney disruptions, as well as her psychological distress associated with such ailments. In addition to this her m-dashes and sporadic capitalization also ensue a sense of rhythm or pulse, like that of the pulse of her own body which remained a concern as she continued to remain isolated in life, and the parallels continue.

According to the *Invisible Hand of the Lyric*, which takes a close look at Emily Dickinson's manuscripts to interpret genre, Dickinson's writing is a direct result of her ill state which cultivated such individualistic attributes and collectives of genres dissected today. According to Dominique Zino, much of Dickinson's poetry is considered "lyric poetry" however the manuscripts themselves have been "studied in such a way that scholars like Susan Howe noticed the overwriting of Dickinson's scrawls along with the typography over orthography methods from editors. Practices done among her prominent editors such as Johnson, Franklin, and Higginson, where patriarchal social structures shaped the first century of Dickinson's work through their lens of interpretation" (Zino 2).

This makes it hard to know for sure what Emily Dickinson's intentions truly were, which is why her manuscripts remain so valuable to this day. The physical words in which Dickinson wrote, parallel the significance of the physical ailments she endured, where her voice remained what was living as she intended to be, despite the edits done to her work. In addition to this her style of lyric form and hymnal interpretations help to articulate her paralleling life. Hymnal verse and meter being more spiritual, and despite Dickinson's grapple with her faith, remain an essential component of her writing, life, and constant illnesses. In addition, lyric poetry is defined as "...traditionally thought of as offering a unique encounter between a poet and the audience and are imagined as sung in a fleeting moment..." (Zino 5). In addition to this, lyric poems have features of "self-reflexiveness", in which Susan Howe also is described as interpreting Dickinson's lyricism as "visual catastrophes". These visual and self-reflexive styles help to reiterate Dickinson's need to physically embody her literature. An example of this is in "My Life a-Loaded Gun" where a gun represents such catastrophes when Howe interprets Dickinson's work by a slanted appearance and the text is read with personified weaponry

features. (Zino 8). Like a loaded gun, death is a topic of concern in this piece, like death remained prevalent in “Unit, like Death, for Whom?” while differences are recognizable between the two poems, the similarities between war, existence, life, and death remain most relevant.

According to Faith Barrett of Penn State University Press, when reviewing the state of the manuscripts from the archive that holds the fascicles of Dickinson’s work, there remains a spectrum of possibilities for interpretation. This appears ironic regarding this longstanding debate among scholars in terms of what state to interpret Dickinson’s work, because her work is hard to decipher in formality from their direct manuscripts, there seems to be varied viewpoints on how to present her writing. Just as the interpretation of life works in this way as well, that Dickinson, with her eye sight, never had clear vision, so she wrote herself into clarity, just as scholars try to find sight as well. In addition, it appears having the archive of her manuscripts provides a constant opportunity for interpreting the work, just as individuals attempt to interpret meaning from their own lives in life. Barrett states that the manuscripts in addition to their authenticity of Dickinson as a writer, show “a noble strength of the volume is the frequency with which contributors turn outward from Dickinson and the fascicles to situate the poet and her writings in the cultural contexts that surround her” (Barrett 357). The archive of the fascicles helps to inform what Dickinson intended for her literature to express all along, and that is a sense of agency, as scholars grapple to find their own interpretations, like Dickinson grappled with her own agency of voice that wasn’t as prevalent in her isolated state in Massachusetts in her time.

Emily Dickinson embraced her style in syntax to emulate what could not be experienced alone with words in her biographical experience with chronic illness. It was through her lack of sight that her words remained clear and her lack of functioning in the end of her life that her work flowed most beautifully because of her experiences with illness. These ailments which

seemed to limit her life, also are what led to her draw to literary work as it still draws others today for clear interpretation. It is through the understanding of this biographical component of Dickinson, that the interpretation of poetry can be best remedied alongside the practice and analysis of her fascicles that is done today which help to emulate the necessity of biographical context to the interpretation of literature. True like the Tomb, Dickinson's poetry will never die, thanks to the work of those who preserve her work, and tactful syntax of her poetry, and the meaningful interpretation of textual analysis of literature that remains valuable in reading poetry today.

## Works Cited

Barrett, Faith. "Review." *Resources for American Literary Study*, vol. 39, 2017, pp. 354–357.

Dickinson, Emily. *Final Harvest Emily Dickinson's Poems*. Edited by Johnson H. Johnson, Little, Brown & Company, 1961.

Hirschhorn, Norbert, and Polly Longworth. "'Medicine Posthumous': A New Look at Emily Dickinson's Medical Conditions." *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 69, no. 2, 1996, pp. 299–316. Doi:10.2307/366669.

Zino, Dominique. "The Invisible Hand of the Lyric: Emily Dickinson's Hypermediated Manuscripts and the Debate over Genre." *Textual Cultures*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1–36.

## American Poetry

The Hues of Langston Hughes; An analysis of poetics and transcendence in the Harlem Renaissance era  
Professor Blake Bronson-Bartlett

### American Poetry

“In Harlem Renaissance literature, African American’s capital city is organic, not mechanical. It is fleshy-and embodied in lively colors, tastes, and sounds” (Bremer 50). According to Professor Sidney H. Bremer of the University of Wisconsin, the Harlem Renaissance is an area of literature with many sensory components. These sensory components lend themselves to the experiences of modernist poetry and that of the Harlem Renaissance era of literature. Of the literary influences of the time, no other writer comes to mind who articulates these many hues quite like that of writer Langston Hughes. Langston Hughes articulates the impact of the era through his careful lyric and musical modes which have an ability to transcend beyond the American landscape to create an impact in this time. However, how did his literature transcend beyond American soil and to what end? These remain the vital questions about the Harlem Renaissance still grappled with today.

Langston Hughes was an influential writer of the Harlem Renaissance era due to his ability and skill to touch the lives of his reader and extrapolate on his own experiences all at once. In his poem “Migrant” readers experience the brilliant juxtaposing of satire from sincerity that Hughes plays with when describing not only an African American history but the present struggles that face African Americans in the United States. “Migrant” specifically tackles themes of historical, political, and satire modes which reached African American and white readers alike. He uses the repetition of “Daddy-O” and “Buddy-O” in the first and last stanzas to mock and relate on a more casual level to those reading. However, by the second stanza Hughes

expands on an important history of the African American's who have migrated in the United States during the Great Migration. "In the eyes once soft benighted/ And the cotton field is frightened/ A thousand miles away" (Hughes 178). By migrating from an exclamatory point of view in the first stanza into a historical view which moves away from slavery, Hughes is pulling the era of the Harlem Renaissance into focus as he migrates alongside the migrants he speaks of in his literature. This poem reflects musical as well as lyric traditions when using narration in the piece, saying "Daddy-O/Buddy-O/Signs his name/In uphill letters/On the check that is his pay..." (Hughes 179). Hughes uses the first lines to reference a particular audience and his last stanza to focus on that audience. He uses the term "uphill" to imply the uphill struggles that his community has faced when speaking about signing for his paycheck and making it in America. The poem covers the hard work of African Americans in this time as they move away from slavery and establish themselves in northern communities in the United States. The poem is vernacular in nature and there is a more impersonal "I" in the poem, to show commodification of the culture and market of selling things as was done often in the early advancement of America. However, it is ironic because instead of selling slaves as was once customary during the slave era, Hughes is trying to "sell" the growth and opportunities of African Americans as they have come to find once migrating. However, using his explicit "Daddy-O" references seem to imply an ironic twist to this praise of opportunity to reveal the struggles that still exist.

Much like the contrast between struggle and opportunity that arose during the Great Migration that "Migrant" touches on, Hughes expands that experience as a writer during the Harlem Renaissance. Langston Hughes does this beyond his impact just from the American experience of African Americans but also pushes literature to migrate across the country abroad. To understand this expansion, understanding more about Langston Hughes is necessary. Angelita

D. Reyes, a Professor of African and African American Studies and English at Arizona State University, comments on the work of Langston Hughes and biographer Arnold Rampersad in her analysis of the *University of Chicago Press*. In the publication Reyes mentions that Rampersad comments a great deal on Hughes' work and life in *Montage of a Dream: The Art of Langston Hughes* edited by John Tidwell and Cheryl R. Ragar. Rampersad believes Langston Hughes, "Led a life of uncommon courage, grace and richness; he also left a body of art of uncommon beauty and consequence" (Reyes 266). Rampersad goes on to say that Hughes is an extraordinary writer, "Given up for dead as a writer at various times in the distant past, Hughes is now seen..." (Reyes 266) Reyes remarks that Langston Hughes was seen not only as a "international literary giant" of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but was also an "iconic national treasure" (Reyes 267). It is with these resounding attributes that Hughes was able to pull an extensive audience to his works globally and make his mark in modernist poetry of the Harlem Renaissance. However, it begs the question on where these astounding literary qualities derived from and how Hughes' impact came to be as it is known today.

According to Reyes's research, "James Mercer Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was born in Joplin, Missouri, to Carolina "Carrie" Mercer Langston Hughes and James Nathaniel Hughes" (Reyes 267). It was with these Missouri roots and the understanding of historical oppression that Hughes grew up to appreciate and value a better future for himself. Reyes goes on to mention that his family was, "Only a generation removed from slavery..." and "came from a lineage of abolitionists and educators emboldened with a sense of freedom and social justice" (Reyes 267). This severely influenced his families' aspirations for their own American dreams as well as Langston Hughes. This heretical history alongside the fact that his father left all impacted Hughes life greatly. Reyes mentions that his father "...abandoned his son and wife and



immigrated to Mexico because of the dehumanizing racism that did not allow him to pursue his talents and business skills in the United States” (Reyes 267). Reyes mentions that in Hughes childhood he “grew estranged from his angry father who “hated: black people” and who did not want to “live like a nigger with niggers” “(Reyes 267). This led to Hughes to lean towards the African American identity and African identities often marginalized and forgotten amongst his own experiences. Reyes describes Hughes as “the People’s Poet”, stating when reading *Montage of a Dream* that it made an impact. “ ...it advanced my knowledge about the variable texts and contexts of Langston Hughes in the United States and in the global arenas of Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Central Asia” (Reyes 269). Through Langston Hughes travels he also expanded his work from an American aesthetic of the Harlem Renaissance to a human aesthetic on oppressions experienced by many marginalized groups, although his focus always remained on black communities of the voiceless.

One of many of Hughes’ very important works includes, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951) which has Hughes’s book of Jazz poems. Reyes says these poems create “thematic unity out of diverse techniques, images, and textures in the manner of Jaxx compositions” (Reyes 269). What makes Hughes poetry so universal, despite its home in the age of the Harlem Renaissance and its target on the black community, is in Hughes ‘ability to tackle complex ideas and themes. “Hughes’s poetry frequently dealt with the complexity of intersectionality-race, class, sexuality, gender-” (Reyes 269). It is with this integration of a complex number of struggles that readers are able to attach themselves to Hughes and his literature. As Reyes mentions, “A major strength of *Montage of a Dream* is that there is a focus on Hughes’s transnational aesthetics and global sensibility” (Reyes 270). Keeping this in mind, it also can be argued, poems from *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* which incorporates some of the

*Deferred* poems as well as many other poems, also articulate the experience of struggle and resilience that lends itself to the Harlem Renaissance era. A way Hughes combines his American and cross global aesthetics into the same modernist lens of Harlem is through his experiences as a traveler. Reyes mentions his poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” and goes on to say it was “written when Hughes was en route to visit his father in Mexico in 1920. Although Hughes was 18 years old, this powerfully spiritual poem reflects his African diasporic and global consciousness about displacement, estrangement, belonging, and empowerment” (Reyes 270). It is through works such as this that Hughes remains successful in his impact to the oppressed all over. As Isabel Soto describes it in her analysis of Hughes poem in Reyes’ analysis, “the literal engaged the figurative across aesthetic, personal, and historic lines” (Reyes 270). When Hughes crosses borders it only further reflects the truths back home and this is what makes Harlem Renaissance writers unique in their era. It is in their ability to remain home bound to an American experience, while exploring similar oppressions around the world that these writers are able to lend aid to their own understanding for a contemplative experience for all to partake in.

Of course, it can go almost without saying that Hughes was most well-known for his musical integration and his lyric tendencies in his poetry. In Hughes first novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930) Reyes mentions Hughes impact and aesthetics amongst the Harlem Renaissance era. Stating that Hughes follows the “blues trope” of the era (Reyes 271). In Steve C. Tracy’s analysis of Hughes according to Reyes, “the oral blues tradition supports the gaining of literacy, there remains a dynamic and unencumbered relationship between orality and literature. For art’s sake, neither is mutually exclusive of the other” (Reyes 271). Reyes mentions that with his novels and poetry, Hughes cannot be limited to one box or title in this era. “Some readers may associate Hughes exclusively with the Harlem Renaissance, but he was a “Renaissance man” of

African American poetics and global sensibilities” (Reyes 273). Langston Hughes works his poetry for a more global understanding through his tendencies as a poet in his modes for writing and his aspirations to impact those who reads his work.

Now that Hughes is better understood, and his impact has been made clear, it is now time to better understand the era of the Harlem renaissance itself. What better way to articulate this era of literature than interpreting Langston Hughes’s “Harlem”. “Harlem” which has remained one of Hughes’s most famous poems to teach, articulates the experience of dreams deferred. The dreams deferred is a reference to a “Montage of a Dream Deferred”, one of the serial poems within Hughes’ poetry archives. The most telling tool Hughes uses within all ten lines is his rhetorical mode of questioning, which asking readers to answer what happens to a dream deferred. The dream is ambiguous but can be interpreted as many dreams, the American dream, the dream of freedom, or the dream of African American communities’ aspirations. However, it is with its ambiguity that Hughes is able to reach all readers and hopefully help them to recognize the impact that the experience of dreams has on the Harlem aesthetic, as it is still the title. Italicizing the final line asking the question, “*Or does it explode?*” articulates both a renewed state to action as well as a dual feeling of pain felt within the poem. “Harlem” uses strong adjectives like, “dry,” “raisin,” “fester,” “sore,” “stink,” “rotten,” “crust” etc. all to add to the impact of the poem which further presses the struggle of the African American experience with these painful descriptions. These word choices also articulate an image of slavery for the viewer with phrases like “raisin in the sun” and “Or crust and sugar over- “(Hughes 268). “Harlem” was a poem which articulates both the positive and negative aesthetics of the African American experience. The Harlem renaissance, in fact, was full of duality in its modes in

literature and as a critical period in time for African American writers that helped it reach all audiences around the world.

According to Sidney H. Bremer, the editor of the Modern Language Association, the Harlem Renaissance is an essential part of American culture. Bremer argues for the remembrance of urban communities amongst a historically white suburban backdrop of representation in America and argues that the true culture of America lies within the Harlem Renaissance. Bremer states that “Just when cities were becoming de facto home for most Americans, much American literature despaired of an urban “home.” It conceded to ethnic minority writers the imaginative home” (Bremer 48). Bremer mentions how ethnic minorities claimed the cities in this time period and it was with this that they were seen as “a home for the transient outcasts of American society” (Bremer 48). Harlem as a result, “had its own cultural resources of language, folkways, and ritual aesthetic forms” (Bremer 48). This allowed for it to form as an aesthetic and an ideal as well as a foundational society to strive above.

One of the most important aspects often overlooked about the Harlem Renaissance which influenced Hughes global impact as a writer, was the fact many renaissance writers were often “mobile crew” as Bremer describes. Saying that they “felt joined, not estranged, by their wanderings, because they were part of a great migration of black people to the urban Northeast around World War 1” (Bremer 48). Just as there were many wandering artists, this led to the understanding that “...the Harlem Renaissance was a civic, as well as an aesthetic, enterprise” (Bremer 48). Writers who were “urban wanders” as Bremer describes include Harlem writers, “...W.E. B. Du Bois from the faculty of Atlanta University, Southerner Zora Neale Hurston from service as a manicurist in Washington DC, Westerner Wallace Thurman from the post office in Los Angeles” Of course, Bremer mentions that “Young Langston Hughes arrived from

Cleveland” and goes on to mention a few more iconic names. “Nella Larsen from Chicago, Rudolph Fisher from Washington, DC, Dorothy West from Boston...” (Bremer 49). What makes the Harlem Renaissance important and unique is that it was an era that took migrant writers with an association to Harlem as a “home” and exposed the complex experiences of society in both the triumphs of the oppressed and the limitations of urbanization as minorities, which resonated globally through these writers’ personal perspectives. According to Bremer, “...the historical memory of slavery had soured all of them (Harlem Renaissance writers) on America’s rural past. It is perhaps not surprising then, that they challenged America’s cultural habit of rural nostalgia” (Bremer 50). The Harlem renaissance embraced the urban experience but used the exploration of folklore and spirituality to move readers beyond one central location. As Bremer better describes it, “the aesthetic cult of African primitivism and the anthropological exploration of African American folklore” were explored in this mode of literature (Bremer 50). It is through the modes of both folk and urban experiences that Hughes was able to transcend his work to further across the ocean and make an impact on a global scale as we know it today. Bremer goes on to mention that Harlem Renaissance literature “recognizes and even celebrates the mix of sex and soul, of jazz and blues, of promise and limitation, of truth and deception in the heart of Harlem, it offers an image of home wondrously adequate to the ambiguities of human life” (Bremer 53). This articulation offers an insight to the truly profound sensibilities of Hughes as a writer, because he too finds this duality impactful in his work, for a united human experience to be best articulate, and therefore resonate with many readers around the world.

Hughes is described by Johnathan o. Wipplinger of the University of Michigan Press as a” African American modernist poet, jazz and blues fan...” and goes on to say mention his travels. “Langston Hughes embarked from New York on a trip that eventually took him across

the Soviet Union, Central Asia, and for one, maybe two nights, to Berlin, Germany” (Wipplinger 165). Wipplinger dissects the ways Hughes poetry and its musical influences impacted the European and more specifically German demographic and how that came to be during the Harlem Renaissance era of the time. Wipplinger describes Hughes project filming a small group film “Black and White” a soviet financed depiction of racism in the United States. It was during this time that Hughes experienced the “African American presence in Germany.” His writing was translated into German which began in 1922 when “Hughes was but 21 years old, long before he became a dominant figure of African American poetry, and it continued almost unabated until 1933” (Wipplinger 166). After this time, Hughes gained more popularity in various countries as more translations began to build.

Wipplinger goes on to mention that in Germany alone, “Translators were particularly attracted to his work—all told, there was seventeen different translators of his poetry into German, who produced more than sixty individual translations of his work” (Wipplinger 166). Wipplinger states that what makes Hughes so transcendent across cultures and communities despite the American aesthetic is how he uses his jazz and blues in his work as “as a means of validating the originality and value of African American vernacular culture” (Wipplinger 166). And stating that Hughes uses musical modes connect because they are “so intimately concerned with dialogue and exchange among a group of performers and the audience that it can be approached only through a kind of critical multilingualism” (Wipplinger 166). Music is universally understood, and this is why Hughes remains so impactful in this era, because not only does he expose oppressions of African Americans to the American people, but he lends them voices and gives this same exposure around the world as he travels and as his work is translated. The interest in

jazz and as a result with Hughes by Europeans and Germany alike relates back to the connectedness to Hughes' poetry that is reached through its lyric and musical frameworks.

It is mentioned by Wiplinger that German interest in jazz and Hughes as well as the Harlem Renaissance, "reciprocally reinforced one another, regularly bleeding into each other through the translation of Hughes" (Wiplinger 166). Wiplinger references Tobias Nagl who wrote about the interest in jazz in this time. He goes on to say that jazz "was conceptualized in the best of circumstances as a means of communicating to Europe the political and cultural emancipatory movements of the Black diaspora, the Harlem Renaissance, Pan-Africanism, and the Civil Rights Movement" (Wiplinger 167). In addition, Wiplinger describes the translations which appealed to Hughes style because of their transcendent nature which all cultures seem to relate to. Wiplinger urges the connection to a strong voice as a strong indicator of multicultural relevance. "Voice should be understood here musically, but it is important to recognize how voice could be understood politically-as an agent of self-assertion in the face of constant oppression, as protest against pressure to assimilate, and, finally, as a call to value one's origins" (Wiplinger 168).

Langston Hughes was a transformative writer of the Harlem Renaissance who used his sensibility of writing style to cross borders and resonate with important communities for African Americans and others oppressed likewise. Through the understanding of some of Langston Hughes poetry in his serial poems in "Dreams Deferred" to the works of "Harlem," and "Migrant", Hughes remains a relevant writer with his skill and lyric and musical qualities. Having the ability to reach global recondition for seemingly American specific political, cultural, and social oppressions and conflict only further resonates the human experience that poetry helps to articulate. Which further pushes not only Langston Hughes skills but the many hues of Hughes

that have resulted from his quest to push boundaries, expectations, and society for the continued evolution of humanity.



## Works Cited

Bremer, Sidney H. "Home in Harlem, New York: Lessons from the Harlem Renaissance Writers." *PMLA*, vol. 105, no. 1, 1990, pp. 47–56. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/462342](http://www.jstor.org/stable/462342)

Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Vintage Classic Edition, 1959.

Reyes, Angelita D. "Memory Telling and Praise-Singing of the Genius of Langston Hughes." *The Journal of African American History*, vol. 94, no. 2, 2009, pp. 266–273. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable.25610080](http://www.jstor.org/stable.25610080)

"Singing the Harlem Renaissance: Langston Hughes, Translation, and Diasporic Blues." *The Jazz Republic: Music, Race, and American Culture in Weimar Germany*, by Jonathan O. Wipplinger, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2017, pp. 165–196. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1qv5n7m.10](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1qv5n7m.10)