

Images of Discrimination – Die bildhafte Sprache in den Gedichten „*I, Too*“ und „*Harlem*“ von Langston Hughes sowie im Song „*Strange Fruit*“ von Billie Holiday ergründet (S II)

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M 1 Langston Hughes: *I, Too* (1945)

There are a lot of poems that mirror the discrimination of black people in the USA. One of the most famous ones is the following poem by Langston Hughes.

I, Too

I, too, sing America.

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

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

15 Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed –

I, too, am America.



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Langston Hughes
(1902–1967)

Hughes was a groundbreaking African American poet who wrote plays, short stories, children's books, and essays.

He constantly voiced his sense of hope and change in his texts. He often depicted the common people and their daily lives in the black community which was characterised by oppression and prejudice.

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M 2 I, Too – First impressions

After reading Langston Hughes' poem **I, Too** for the first time, share your general impressions about the speaker's feelings with your classmates.

Tasks

1. What is your personal impression of the poem? Underline **3–5 adjectives** to describe your emotions while reading the poem.

You may add your own choice of adjectives to the list as well!

The lyrical I/ the speaker seems to be ...

aggressive, ambivalent, annoyed, bitter, calm, cheerful, clever, confident, desperate, defeated, defiant, earnest, excited, faithful, free, frustrated, happy, humiliated, loving, modest, oppressed, optimistic, pessimistic, proud, questioning, reflective, sad, straightforward, strong, undefeated, unstoppable, weak ...

My additional ideas: _____

2. Be ready to explain why you have used these adjectives. Take notes.

Example: confident ⇒ l. 16 optimism, belief in change



3. Talk with your partner to share your first impressions.



M 3 *I, Too* – Visualising the feelings and the tone

*"A picture is a poem without words." Keeping this quotation by Horace in mind, select your favourite picture to sum up the tone of the poem **I, Too** by Langston Hughes.*

Tasks

1. Decide which of the **four photos** of M 4 fits best to the speaker's emotions. Give reasons for your opinion and write a short statement (3–5 sentences).

If **none** of the given photos conveys the mood you are looking for, describe what kind of photo you would choose instead and why. You may also draw a sketch of your idea.

Language support:



The photo / symbol ...

- ... visually represents ...
- ... expresses ...
- ... conveys the idea that ...
- ... stands for ...
- ... symbolises ...
- ... creates the feeling that ...
- ... reminds me of ...
- ... illustrates the idea of ...
- ... depicts ...


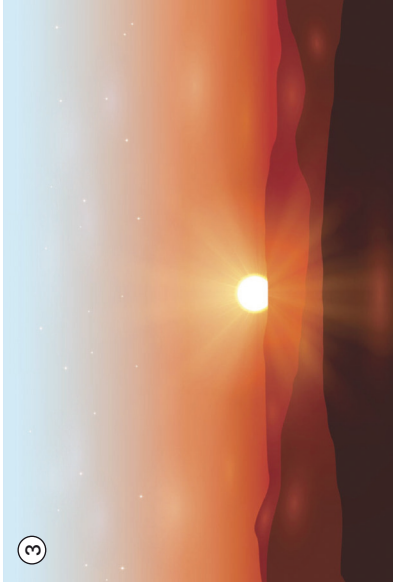

My photo / sketch:

My statement:

2. Meet with classmates who have opted for "your" photo in the respective corner of the classroom. Share your statements and reasons for your choice.

3. Decide on a speaker for your corner who is going to sum up your arguments for the rest of the class.

M 4 Getting a picture of the poem's tone

 <p>1</p> <p>© thinkstock/istock</p>	<p>I, Too</p> <p>I, too, sing America.</p> <p>I am the darker brother. They send me to eat in the kitchen When company comes, 5 But I laugh, And eat my soup, And grow strong.</p> <p>Tomorrow, I'll be at the table 10 When company comes Nobody'll dare Say to me, "Eat in the kitchen," Then.</p> <p>15 Besides, They'll see how beautiful I am And be ashamed –</p> <p>I, too, am America.</p>	 <p>3</p> <p>© thinkstock/istock</p>	 <p>4</p> <p>© thinkstock/istock</p>
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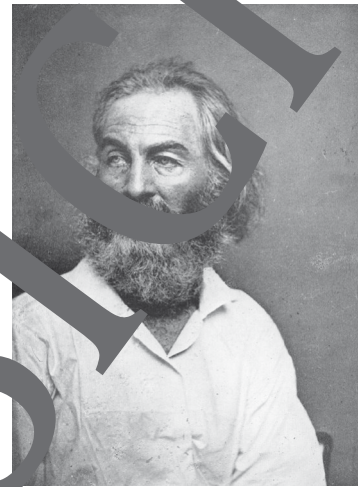
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M 7 Walt Whitman: *I hear America singing* (1860)

To understand the larger context of Langston Hughes' poem *I, Too, let's go back in history and read a poem by Walt Whitman (1819–1892). Whitman wrote a lot of poems conveying a patriotic feeling towards America in the 19th century. *I, Too* is considered by many scholars to be a poetic answer to Whitman from the beginning of the 20th century.*

Walt Whitman: *I hear America singing*

- 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,
 5 The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat,
 the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,
 The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench,
 the hatter singing as he stands,
 The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way
 in the morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,
 The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife
 at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,
 Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
 10 The day what belongs to the day – at night the party of
 young fellows, robust, friendly,
 Singing with open mouths their great melodious songs.



Walt Whitman

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Vocabulary Aids

1 **carol**: a happy or religious song usually sung at Christmas – 2 **blithe**: happy and light-hearted – 3 **carpenter**: Zimmermann – 3 **plank**: a long, flat piece of wood – 3 **beam**: hier: Balken – 4 **mason**: a skilled worker in brick or stone, e.g. constructing walls – 5 **deckhand**: an often unskilled worker on a ship – 5 **steamboat**: Dampfschiff – 6 **hatter**: a person who makes or sells hats – 7 **wood-cutter**: a person whose job is felling trees – 7 **ploughboy**: Ackerknecht – 7 **intermission**: break, pause

Tasks

1. **Brainstorm**: What do you associate with singing? When did you sing the last time? What? Why?
2. Outline the various people or groups that the speaker refers to. What do they have in common?
3. Find an example of synecdoche (e.g. the word "suits" refers to businessmen) and of anaphora (the repetition of the first part of a sentence) in this poem and explain their function.
4. Evaluate if you believe Langston Hughes' poem *I, Too* is a response to Whitman and explain why/why not.
5. **Creative task**: Write a poem in free verse with the title *I hear America singing* for the 21st century and choose modern professions and groups of people you focus on.

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