



# Questions: Three Songs about Lynching

Read all three poems, then focus on your assigned poem and discuss the related questions below.

## SILHOUETTE

- What does it mean to “swoon”? Why is the speaker telling the Southern woman not to swoon?
- What do the terms “gentle lady” and “white womanhood” reveal about the reason for hanging the Black man?
- What might the speaker mean when he tells the woman to “be good”?
- How was the practice of lynching influenced by the relationship between gender and race?
- What is the mood or feeling of the poem?

## FLIGHT

- What is the irony of telling the “runner” to put his toes in the mud and leave no track? What is the speaker suggesting?
- What do the lines “I didn’t touch her” and “white flesh ain’t for me” reveal about why the Black man is being stalked?
- What is the speaker’s message about the possibility of escape or justice?
- What is the mood or feeling of the poem?

## LYNCHING SONG

- Who is speaking in this poem? Is there more than one speaker?
- What is the significance of the language shifting from “the black boy die” in the first stanza to “the white folks die” in the second?
- What does it mean for the white folks to die when they are the ones doing the killing?
- What is the meaning of “NOT I” at the end? What message is conveyed by the Black boy, even after he is dead?
- What is the mood or feeling of the poem? How is it different from the other two?



Photo source: Parks, Gordon, photographer. Portrait of Langston Hughes. United States, 1943. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017858893>.

**Langston Hughes** (1902–1967) grew up in Joplin, Missouri, and later settled in Cleveland, Ohio. Hughes began writing poetry as a teenager and, in 1921, he published his first poem—“The Negro Speaks of Rivers”—in the NAACP magazine, *The Crisis*. Hughes received praise for his poem and spent the next years in New York and Paris developing his writing. In 1926, Hughes’ first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, was published. His celebration of Black culture and analysis of racism in the U.S. made him an important contributor to the Harlem Renaissance throughout the 1920s. For the next several decades, Hughes published a rich collection of poetry, plays and novels, and he lectured throughout the U.S. and internationally.

He wrote a column for the Black newspaper, *The Chicago Defender*, and served as a war correspondent during the Spanish Civil War. Two of Hughes’ most important poems are “Let America Be America Again” and “Harlem (What happens to a dream deferred?)”, in which he explores the hope of America within the context of racism and segregation. Hughes never married. Many scholars believe he was a gay man, but there is little evidence due to Hughes’ secrecy about his personal life during a time when it was dangerous to be openly LGBTQ. Today, Langston Hughes’ work continues to be studied and translated, and he remains one of the most influential writers in American history.