

Navigating Public and Hidden Realms; Date: Mar 25, 2023; Name: Theresa Foley; Class:
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Through an examination of select poems by Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Genevieve Taggard, these works collectively reveal the intricate negotiation between public and hidden spaces, illustrating how poets employ literary devices to illuminate societal tensions and advocate for social change. Through vivid imagery, symbolism, and contrast, the poets navigate the dynamic relationship between public spaces, such as streets and protests, and hidden realms, like inner turmoil and concealed emotional landscapes. By addressing both the tangible vibrancy of public spaces and the concealed realities within individuals and society, the poems underscore the interconnectedness of public and hidden realms, urging for greater social awareness and empowerment. Ultimately, these explorations serve to challenge societal norms and structures, encouraging readers to confront systemic injustices and engage in collective action to effect meaningful change. Richard Wright's poem "We of the Streets," celebrates urban streets as vibrant hubs of communal interactions and collective identity, employing vivid imagery to underscore their significance in shaping community dynamics. In "I Look at the World," Hughes provides insights from marginalized viewpoints within public spaces, examining societal barriers and delving into the ways marginalized individuals navigate and challenge societal norms. McKay's juxtaposition of the city's facade with inner turmoil in Taggard's "Interior" depicts the middle class's isolation within domestic confines, indirectly revealing the obscured sacrifices of marginalized communities and unveiling the covert societal tolls of industrialization and capitalism.

"We of the Streets" by Richard Wright is a poem that celebrates the vibrancy and vitality of urban life, particularly focusing on the experiences of marginalized communities within the city. Set against the backdrop of bustling streets, the poem captures the essence of everyday life in the urban environment. Wright establishes the atmosphere of the streets, describing them as "full of the scent of us—odors of onions

drifting from doorways, effuvium / of baby new-born downstairs, seeping smells of warm soap-suds—the streets are / lush with the ferment of our living.” (Wright, lines 1-3). The phrase “full of the scent of us” suggests a profound connection between the people and the environment, implying that the smells emanating from the streets are not merely incidental but are intimately tied to the lives of the inhabitants. This evokes a sense of communal identity and collective presence within the urban space. The specific scents described further deepen this portrayal. The “odors of onions drifting from doorways” evoke images of home-cooked meals and communal gatherings, suggesting a sense of domesticity and shared meals among the residents. The “effuvium of baby new-born downstairs” introduces the delicate and tender aroma associated with newborns, emphasizing the cycle of life and the presence of families within the urban landscape. Finally, the “seeping smells of warm soap-suds” conjure images of cleanliness and hygiene, hinting at the daily routines and rituals of the inhabitants. By describing the streets as “lush with the ferment of our living,” Wright captures the vibrant and dynamic nature of urban life. The use of the word “ferment” suggests a sense of growth and activity, implying that the city is alive and thriving with the energy of its inhabitants. Overall, these lines paint a vivid and immersive picture of the sensory experiences that define life in the city, highlighting the rich tapestry of sights, sounds, and smells that contribute to the unique character of urban spaces.

Richard Wright reflects on the collective identity and experiences of the inhabitants of the urban streets. He describes the vibrant energy and vitality of street life, portraying it as a bustling hub of communal interactions and shared identity. Continuing this reflection, the poet captures the essence of communal life and solidarity within urban streets: “Our sunshine is a common hope; our common summer and common winter a common joy and a common sorrow; / our fraternity is shoulder-rubbing crude with

unspoken love; / our password the wry smile that speaks a common fate” (Wright, lines 13-15). Wright uses natural imagery, such as sunshine, summer, and winter, to symbolize shared experiences among the residents of the streets. By describing them as “common,” he emphasizes the universality of these experiences, suggesting that despite individual differences, the community finds unity in collective hopes and struggles. This line “Our fraternity is shoulder-rubbing crude with unspoken love;” depicts the close bonds and mutual support among the residents, portraying their interactions as “shoulder-rubbing crude” yet infused with “unspoken love.” Despite occasional rough interactions, there's an unspoken yet deeply felt sense of care and affection within the community. The “wry smile” serves as a symbol of acknowledgment and understanding among the residents, reflecting their shared destiny and resilience in the face of adversity. It implies a sense of acceptance and camaraderie, suggesting that despite their challenges, the community finds strength and solidarity in their collective experiences.

Richard Wright reflects on the transcendent and empowering experience of collective action and solidarity within the urban streets. He portrays the streets as bustling hubs of activity and camaraderie, where the residents find:

“[That] there is something in the streets that [makes them] feel immortality when [they] rushed / along ten thousand strong, hearing [their] chant fill the world, wanting to do what / none of [them] would do alone, aching to shout the forbidden word, knowing that [they] / of the streets are deathless...” (Wright, lines 18-21).

The phrase “there is something in the streets that [makes them] feel immortality” suggests a sense of invincibility and transcendence that arises from the collective energy and unity found within the streets. This feeling of “immortality” stems from the belief in the enduring power of collective action and shared purpose. The imagery of rushing along “ten thousand strong” evokes a powerful sense of unity and solidarity among the inhabitants of the streets. This collective movement and chant filling the world symbolizes the amplification of their voices and the resonance of their shared message beyond the confines of the streets themselves. The desire to do “what none... would do alone.... [and] to shout the forbidden word” reflects a yearning for collective empowerment and the breaking of societal barriers and norms. This suggests a willingness to challenge authority and stand up for what they believe in, even in the face of opposition or repression. The assertion that “[they] of the streets are deathless” underscores the enduring legacy and resilience of urban communities. Despite the challenges and struggles they may face, there is a sense of permanence and strength that comes from their collective identity and shared experiences. The author highlights the sense of invincibility and immortality that arises from collective unity, urging readers to recognize the enduring strength and resilience of marginalized communities within the urban landscape.

Furthermore, Langston Hughes reflects on their observations of the world from the perspective of a person with a black face. They describe what they see and know about the barriers and injustices imposed by society:

“I look then at the silly walls / Through dark eyes in a dark face— / And this is what I know: / That all these walls oppression builds / Will have to go!” (Hughes, lines 6-10).

These lines from Langston Hughes' poem “I Look at the World” convey a sense of defiance and determination in the face of oppression. The speaker, looking at the world through “dark eyes in a dark face,” suggests an awareness of their marginalized identity and the obstacles they face. The mention of “silly walls” built by oppression implies that these barriers are artificial and futile, perhaps even mocking the attempts to confine or restrict the speaker. By declaring that these walls “will have to go,” the speaker asserts a conviction in the eventual dismantling of oppressive structures. This assertion reflects a belief in the inevitability of liberation and the eventual triumph over oppression.

Moreover, he reflects on their observations of the world, acknowledging the oppression and barriers they face. They express a determination to challenge these obstacles and advocate for change:

“I look at my own body / With eyes no longer blind— / And I see that my own hands can make / The world that's in my mind. / Then let us hurry, comrades, / The road to find.” (Hughes, lines 11-16).

These lines from “I Look at the World” convey a powerful message of empowerment and agency. The speaker undergoes a transformation, moving from a state

of blindness to a state of clarity and realization. By looking at their own body with “eyes no longer blind,” the speaker recognizes their own potential and ability to effect change. This realization empowers them to take action, acknowledging that their own hands have the power to shape the world according to the vision in their mind, reflecting a sense of personal responsibility and determination to effect change. The call to action in the final two lines, “Then let us hurry, comrades, The road to find,” underscores the urgency and collective nature of this endeavor. The use of “comrades” suggests solidarity and unity among those who share this vision for change, emphasizing the collaborative effort required to bring it to fruition.

McKay sets the scene by describing the middle-class home as a fortress and the act of drawing down the curtain:

“A middle class fortress in which to hide! / Draw down the curtain as if saying
No, / While noon's ablaze, ablaze outside. / And outside people work and sweat /
And the day clings by and the hard day ends.”

This line portrays the home as a fortress, suggesting a sense of security and protection from the outside world. However, the term "fortress" also implies a degree of isolation or separation from broader societal issues and concerns. It highlights the tendency of the middle class to retreat into the comfort and familiarity of their own domestic space, perhaps as a means of shielding themselves from the challenges and hardships of the external world. The act of drawing down the curtain symbolizes a deliberate rejection or

denial of external realities. It suggests a desire to create a barrier between the interior of the home and the intensity of the outside world, as indicated by the repetition of “ablaze.” This juxtaposition emphasizes the contrast between the tranquility of the domestic space and the vibrancy of life outside, highlighting the sense of disconnection between the two realms. These lines vividly depict the laborious and arduous nature of life outside the confines of the home. The mention of “people work and sweat” conveys a sense of physical exertion and toil, suggesting the harsh realities faced by those engaged in daily labor. The phrase “the day clings by” evokes a sense of the passage of time, emphasizing the relentless progression of the workday. Overall, these lines serve to contrast the relative calmness and comfort of the middle-class home with the harshness and intensity of life outside.

McKay describes the societal discontent and anger brewing among those who feel deceived or oppressed. This sets the context for the speaker's question about whether the privileged individual's concerns will be heard amidst the growing uproar of societal discontent:

“While all around you gathers the rage / Of cheated people / Will we hear your
fret / In the rising noise of the streets? Oh no!”

The speaker describes the collective anger and frustration of those who feel deceived or wronged by societal injustices. This “rage” symbolizes the discontent and resentment that simmers among marginalized or exploited communities. The use of the word “cheated” suggests a sense of betrayal or exploitation, indicating that these individuals feel

aggrieved by systemic inequalities or injustices. The phrase "all around you" emphasizes the pervasive nature of this discontent, suggesting that it permeates the broader social fabric. Here, the speaker questions whether the concerns and anxieties of the middle-class individual will be audible amidst the growing uproar of societal discontent. The term "fret" conveys a sense of worry or anxiety, suggesting that the speaker is questioning whether the privileged concerns of the middle class will be drowned out by the more urgent and pressing grievances of marginalized communities. The phrase "rising noise of the streets" evokes a sense of escalating turmoil and unrest, emphasizing the increasing volume and intensity of societal discontent. This exclamation reflects the speaker's skepticism or dismissal of the likelihood that the middle-class individual's anxieties will be heard or acknowledged amidst the clamor of societal upheaval. It suggests a sense of resignation or indifference to the plight of the privileged class in the face of broader social injustices. The repetition of "Oh no!" underscores the speaker's conviction that the concerns of the middle class are inconsequential in comparison to the larger issues of societal inequality and oppression. Overall, these lines highlight the contrast between the insulated world of the middle class and the tumultuous reality of societal unrest. They serve to critique the complacency and detachment of the privileged class in the face of systemic injustices, while also emphasizing the urgency and significance of addressing broader social issues.

The analysis of Richard Wright's "We of the Streets," Langston Hughes' "I Look at the World," and Genevieve Taggard's "Interior" collectively supports the interpretive thesis of exploring the interplay between public and hidden spaces in poetry to advocate for social change. Each poem offers distinct insights: Richard Wright's "We of the Streets": Celebrates urban life and communal identity, emphasizing the vitality of public spaces in shaping collective experiences and resilience among marginalized communities. Langston Hughes' "I Look at the World": Provides marginalized perspectives within

public spaces, advocating for dismantling oppressive structures and empowering individuals to challenge societal norms. Genevieve Taggard's "Interior": Juxtaposes domestic comfort with hidden struggles, revealing societal tolls and emphasizing the interconnectedness of public and private realms in societal narratives. These analyses are related to the larger interpretive thesis by showcasing how poets use literary devices to illuminate societal tensions and advocate for social change. The poems navigate the dynamic relationship between public and hidden spaces, urging for greater social awareness and collective action. The broader implications suggest the importance of acknowledging hidden realities within societal structures and fostering empathy, empowerment, and social responsibility to address systemic injustices and create a more equitable society.