

Notes on *Ballad of the Landlord* by Langston Hughes:

The themes of “*Ballad of the Landlord*” come out of a vital American literary tradition: The poem taps the energy and meaning of much of the social protest literature of the 1930’s. Poems, stories, and essays about tenant evictions, rent protests, and similar activities were common fare in the social realist American literature of the 1930’s. In that tradition, Hughes represents the unfair advantage of society in this struggle: The landlord has only to call the tenant a communist (“He’s trying to ruin the government/ And overturn the land!”) for the police to throw the tenant in jail. Another example of the influence of radical 1930’s literary roots is the abrupt form of the last three stanzas and, particularly, the capitalized words of the last stanza, which may remind readers of the “newsreels” in John Dos Passos’s trilogy of novels, *U.S.A.* (1930-1936), in which he creates montages of newspaper headlines to construct a realistic background for his fictional narratives. Nowhere was this 1930’s social realism stronger than in the African American literary tradition, which goes back to the Harlem Renaissance (1920-1929), a literary, musical, and artistic movement that included Hughes as one of its major practitioners: His first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926), is one of the landmarks of the movement.

What makes “*Ballad of the Landlord*” unique is Hughes’s own special treatment of this incident. In the early stanzas, he establishes the justice of the tenant’s claims against his landlord but closes realistically with American society’s typical response to protests similar to the tenant’s, especially in the 1930’s: eviction and jail. There is no justice in this society, Hughes complains, particularly for African Americans. The landlord has all the weight of the police and the judicial system on his side; the tenant has only truth and moral rightness. Like many traditional ballads about folk heroes fighting for justice (Robin Hood, for example), Hughes’s “*Ballad of the Landlord*” honors the struggle of the poor and disenfranchised. However, the title of the poem ultimately and ironically tells readers who the hero of the poem in this society really is and who will finally win this struggle.

In the poem *Ballad of the Landlord* by Langston Hughes there is a hole on the roof of the house. The landlord has already been informed about it. The steps have been broken down. But when the landlord comes up, he does not fall down. The landlord says that the tenant has to pay him ten dollars. But before the landlord repairs the house, he will have got more than that.

Will the landlord get expulsion orders from the court to expel the tenant and throw his furniture in the street? But he talks about high moral standards. If the tenant lands his fist on him, he will not be able to say a word. Then the landlord will inform the police and get the man arrested, saying that the man is challenging the law and order. The police will follow and arrest him. He will be taken to the police station and kept in a small room inside the jail. The next day there will be the headlines in the paper: Man threatens landlord; Tenant had no money; Negro is sentenced 90 days’ imprisonment.

The poem is trying to show the extent of social injustice in America. The tenant is exploited by the landlord and the police and the court help landlord to exploit the tenant more. But the tenant gets help from nowhere. What he can do is to use his own force. This is a protest poem. It encourages the tenants to fight against the landlord. The landlord just takes the rent, but he does not repair the house. If he does something to protect himself he is arrested and imprisoned. The police, the court and the press don’t take the side of the tenant. The poem powerfully raises a strong voice against color discrimination in America. The landlords are

Whites, so are the police and the judges. Even the presses do not write impartially. The papers are the mouthpiece of the Whites. By using the simple colloquial language of the Blacks, the poem conveys the deep feelings of the Negroes.

This poem is a subtle charge against the racial discrimination in the United States of America. In the USA, ordinary events of life like the relationship between the landlord and the tenant-the white tends to discriminate against the black. So the black poet Hughes is inspired to pour his anger through the medium of the poem. He ironically gives the title of the poem 'Ballad of the Landlord.' He presents precise details of insignificant events like the leakage of the roof and the broken steps. He is mocking at the very idea of communal equality in the USA.

This poem is dramatically opened and dramatically ended. Hughes uses colloquial language to express his ideas. By imagining the coming of the police, his arrest and consequent headlines in the press he creates an atmosphere of immediacy and dramatic intensity. The lines of the poem are made long and short to indicate the changing moods of the narrator. The expression of the poem is strikingly new and it goes straight to the heart of the audience.