

Daybreak in Alabama



SUMMARY

The speaker envisions one day becoming a songwriter of color and writing some music about the sunrise in Alabama. The speaker's music will include beautiful songs that rise out of the ground like mist rises from a swamp and that fall from the sky like gentle droplets of water. The speaker lists the diverse things that this music will contain: very tall trees, the smell of pine, the scent of red clay that's wet from the rain, long red necks, faces that are bright red like poppy flowers, brown arms, and the eyes of black and white people looking like field daisies. The speaker will also sing about white, black, brown, and yellow hands, and hands the color of red clay. The hands that the speaker plans to sing about will be touching all people with kindness and also touching each other as naturally as the dew falls in that early morning music, when the speaker finally gets to be a songwriter of color and write music about sunrise in Alabama.

The speaker will “put white hands / And black hands and brown and yellow hands / And red clay earth hands in” the song of Alabama, placing human beings of various skin colors side by side. The more literal “harmony” of music thus also becomes a [metaphor](#) for the *figurative* harmony that the speaker envisions someday existing between different races.

Again, it's important to remember that Hughes was writing in a racially segregated America. The poem's image of all these different hands “touching everybody with kind fingers” as easily and gently as dew touches the morning grass is all the more striking given that, when the poem was first published, Black people often couldn't even sit on the same benches or drink from the same water fountains as white people. The speaker hopes for a world where racial harmony is seen as something normal and natural, but the focus on “daybreak” highlights that this vision of racial harmony is not a reality yet. In other words, the speaker's hope for a new beginning, a new dawn, of racial unity in Alabama speaks to the necessity of racial harmony while also reminding readers that this utopian vision of unity has yet to be achieved.



THEMES



RACIAL UNITY AND HARMONY

“Daybreak in Alabama” boldly imagines a future of peace, unity, and cooperation between all races. The poem's speaker expresses a wish to someday write music about the dawn in Alabama, and to include in this music images of people of different races living together in harmony. Such unity, the poem implies, is as natural as “the scent of pine needles” or “the smell of red clay after rain.” Written during the era of segregation in the American South, the poem speaks to the longing for a fresh start—a “daybreak”—in which people of all races will overcome prejudice and “[t]ouch each other natural as dew.”

In describing what the “music about / Daybreak in Alabama” will be like, the speaker first focuses on images of natural diversity. The speaker wants to fill this music with varied sights, scents, and colors from nature, including “tall trees,” “pine needles,” and “red clay.” These “songs,” the speaker says, will seem to “ris[e] out of the ground like swamp mist / And fall[] out of heaven like soft dew.” In other words, they will gently, peacefully, and easily emerge from nature itself. The music the speaker wishes to write won't simply *describe* what Alabama is like, but will actually *come from* and be *part of* Alabama.

The speaker then mentions including images of different skin colors in these songs, and in doing so implies that *human* diversity is similarly natural and beautiful—and that all people are part of the same land from which this music will emerge.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-23



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*When I get ...
... Daybreak in Alabama*

The speaker begins by introducing a dream, or a vision for the future: that of being a composer and writing songs about Alabama mornings.

The text we're using in this guide sticks to that of the original poem, though Hughes cut the word “colored” (a segregation-era term for Black people) in a later publication. In any case, its inclusion in this original version identifies the speaker as a person of color. It's also significant that the “daybreak” the speaker wants to write music about is in *Alabama*, one of the states in the American South where segregation laws keeping Black people separate from white people were especially strict. Together, these facts suggest that “daybreak” here refers not just to a *literal* sunrise but also to the speaker's longing for a fresh start for race relations in the United States.

What's more, the poem announces the speaker's wish to compose music *someday*, when the speaker “get[s] to be” a “composer.” The fact that that wish lies in an indeterminate

future implies that it is still a long way from being fulfilled.

Meanwhile, the [colloquial](#) phrase “I’m gonna write me,” common both in Southern slang and in African American Vernacular English, is appropriate given the poem’s setting. It also establishes the speaker’s tone as informal and even intimate, as if sharing a deeply personal wish with a close friend.

Adding to this feeling of informality is the fact that the lines have no regular [meter](#); the poem is written in [free verse](#), which keeps things feeling free-flowing and conversational.

[Enjambment](#) adds to the effect, as the opening lines here spill right across the line breaks and help the poem pick up speed.

Just because the poem doesn't have a meter or [rhyme scheme](#), however, doesn't mean that it lacks music. For example, the [alliteration](#) of sharp /c/ sounds in the phrase “colored composer” adds boldness to the speaker’s vision and also helps underscore the speaker’s identity as a person of color.

LINES 4-6

*And I'm gonna ...
... like soft dew*

Lines 4-6 elaborate on the music that the speaker wants to write, relating it to the natural world. First, the speaker says the music will include the “purtiest songs,” with the word “prettiest” again evoking certain Southern dialects. This continues the poem’s use of informal language from the opening lines, strengthening the impression of a voice speaking earnestly and spontaneously.

The next two lines relate these pretty songs directly to nature through a pair of [similes](#):

Rising out of the ground like a swamp mist
And falling out of heaven like soft dew

These comparisons highlight the speaker’s wish to compose harmonious music evoking the peace and serenity of nature. The speaker's music will seem to emerge from the very world it describes. This, in turn, suggests that the images such music contains (which the speaker will detail throughout the rest of the poem) similarly are part of Alabama, that they belong to this world.

Meanwhile, the specific contrast of “[r]ising out of the ground” and “falling out of heaven” may suggest the way in which nature itself encompasses and includes opposites. The implication is possibly that, as nature includes both “[r]ising” “swamp mist” and “falling” “dew,” the speaker’s music might be able to bring together opposites in the same way.

LINES 7-13

*I'm gonna put ...
... field daisy eyes*

Lines 7-13 are made up of a single, continuous clause, listing a

wide range of images from nature that the speaker wants to include in this music about dawn in Alabama. The speaker mentions varied sights, smells, and colors, including “tall tall trees,” the scents of “pine needles” and “red clay after rain,” and “field daisy eyes.” The poem thus shows how nature includes diversity and implies that diversity is *itself* natural.

Note how lines 8-12 all begin with the word “And” and then introduce a new element from nature. This [anaphora](#) (and broader [parallelism](#)) possibly reflects the speaker’s wish for this music to be as inclusive as nature itself, linking together these diverse elements into a single, harmonious whole.

The repetition of the word “And” is also an example of [polysyndeton](#), which tends to create a piling up effect. The speaker's list seems to go on and on, the music expanding to include more and more different things. This expansion, in turn, suggests the vastness of the diversity that the speaker seeks to capture.

Finally, these lines also hint at a subtle *human* presence within the natural setting, with mentions of “long red necks,” “poppy colored faces,” “big brown arms,” and “field daisy eyes.” (The word “colored” here may further recall the “colored composer” of line 1, reminding readers that *race* is what’s at stake behind these images of natural diversity.) It is still unclear, by this point, if these human attributes are simply a [personification](#) of nature or if they belong to actual human beings. Nevertheless, by mixing in human elements with nature alongside its various colors, the poem starts to suggest a vision of diverse human beings existing in harmony with nature and, by implication, with one another.

LINES 14-17

*Of black and ...
... hands in it*

If the previous lines focused on the inherent diversity and harmony found in nature, lines 14-17 turn to spotlight that of human beings—something that, the poem implies, exists within and alongside nature’s diversity. With the [enjambment](#) of lines 13-14, the poem reveals that the human attributes mentioned in the previous section indeed belong to *people*:

And the field daisy eyes
Of black and white black white black people

The speaker then goes on to mention “black,” “white,” “brown,” and “yellow” hands, before immediately returning to nature with “red clay earth hands.” This further integrates humankind with nature and suggests that diverse human beings are all a part of a single, natural world—one that they must share.

Here, too, the poem goes on listing items the speaker hopes to put into music, expanding on the [anaphora](#) of the previous section (as the speaker again begins consecutive lines with the

word "And"). Only here, by explicitly adding different races to the list, the speaker suggests how the racial diversity of human beings is a natural extension of that found in nature. After nature's catalogue of different colors and scents, the inclusion of human skin colors into that overall picture makes an implicit argument that harmony between races is, in fact, entirely natural.

There's more [polysyndeton](#) here as well:

And black hands and brown and yellow hands
And red clay earth hands [...]

This gives the impression of an inclusive musical harmony, growing gradually and spontaneously to include more and more people.

A similar effect is achieved by the [asyndeton](#) and quick repetition of the phrase "white black white black people." This rapid succession of words adds to the sense that the poem's inclusive vision is spontaneous and unplanned—and that the interracial harmony that the speaker envisions would be similarly natural and unforced. Just as importantly, the phrase literally "mixes" the words *black* and *white*, reflecting the harmony which the speaker envisions between individuals of those races.

LINES 18-19

*Touching everybody with ...
... natural as dew*

Lines 18-19 elaborate on the image of "hands" of different races, highlighting their intimate harmony and connection. Here, the [anaphora](#) of "Touching" emphasizes intimate, human-to-human contact in the racial utopia imagined by the speaker. At the same time, the sound of this [repetition](#) also lends a lyrical, rousing quality to the speaker's impassioned longing for such a future.

What's more, the speaker describes hands touching "with kind fingers." Of course, it's not literally the fingers that are "kind" but people joining hands. With "kind fingers," the poem makes the point that it is precisely through *touch* and intimate connection that genuine kindness can be spread among all people.

The poem thus offers an implicit rejoinder to policies of racial segregation, which prohibited Black people from associating with or occupying the same spaces as white people. Lines 18-19 also contain what might be called the poem's main thesis—the speaker's [simile](#) that such "[t]ouching" between members of different races would be as "natural as dew." Note how that "dew" recalls the "soft dew" that fell "out of heaven" earlier in the poem, again implying that such "touching" is simply part of nature, that it is part of the landscape of Alabama. It thus follows that racial segregation, which makes this kind of interracial contact and solidarity impossible, must

be unnatural.

LINES 20-23

*In that dawn ...
... In Alabama.*

If the rest of the poem elaborated on the speaker's utopian vision for the future, these final lines return readers to the speaker's present—where the speaker's dreams have yet to be realized.

Line 20 builds on the [simile](#) from the prior line about fingers "[t]ouching each other natural as dew." Line 19 is [enjambéd](#), and that "dew" is specifically the dew that appears "[i]n that dawn of music":

Touching each other natural as dew
In that dawn of music when I

The poem comes full circle here, with the return of the phrases "when I / Get to be a colored composer" and "daybreak / In Alabama." As the poem comes to an end, this [repetition](#) creates what is sometimes called an envelope or frame structure: the poem ends in the same or a similar way to how it began.

This frame reminds readers that not so much a celebration of current racial unity as a longing for a dream yet to be fulfilled: the speaker is not a composer yet, nor is the world which the speaker hopes to celebrate yet a reality. Instead, the poem can only look forward to "that dawn of music"—that is, the indefinite future when the speaker's songs, and the new beginning which they represent, will finally come to be.



SYMBOLS



DAYBREAK/DAWN

Morning and dawn [symbolize](#) hope and renewal in the poem. The speaker doesn't simply wish to write music about Alabama, but about the "[d]aybreak in Alabama"—which represents the speaker's wish to see a *new beginning* for race relations in America, a dawning of racial harmony and unity. The mentions of "dew" in the poem, which appears in the morning and typically evaporates by midday, adds to the symbolism here. That the speaker's song will be "like soft dew" suggests that it will be the signal of a new day in a more united world.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Daybreak in Alabama"
- **Line 6:** "And falling out of heaven like soft dew"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Touching each other natural as dew / In that dawn of music when I"

- **Lines 22-23:** "And write about daybreak / In Alabama."



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Daybreak in Alabama" uses [alliteration](#) to emphasize important moments and to simply give the poem a sense of musicality, one that evokes the beauty and harmony of nature.

For example, the phrase "colored composer" in line 1, which returns in line 21, underscores the speaker's identity as both "colored" (a dated term for Black) and an aspiring "composer." It draws attention to the speaker's aspiration to write harmonious and inclusive music.

Later on, the reader finds the phrase "tall tall trees," with its alliteration reinforced by the [epizeuxis](#) of "tall." The crisp /t/ sounds again add subtle music to the image, and also underscore the impressive height of the trees. Such short moments of alliteration, like the consecutive /b/ sounds of "big brown arms" in line 12, pop up throughout the poem and highlight the speaker's idyllic vision of nature and people in harmony.

The use of alliteration, along with other sonic devices such as [assonance](#) and [consonance](#), might also underline the *unity* of nature, how its distinct elements interact and harmoniously coexist. Note the /r/ sounds of "red clay after rain," for example, which reflect nature's delicate touch and highlight the relationship between the fresh-smelling ground to the rain that has touched it and made it wet. The assonance here (that shared long /ay/ sound in "clay" and "rain") adds to the effect.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "colored composer"
- **Line 4:** "put," "purtiest"
- **Line 7:** "tall tall trees"
- **Line 9:** "red," "rain"
- **Line 12:** "big brown"
- **Line 21:** "colored composer"

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#) appears only briefly in the poem and works much like [alliteration](#). It, too, helps to give the poem a sense of musicality and harmony. Although words elsewhere in the poem can be said to be subtly assonant (like "I" and "write" in lines 1 and 2), it's striking that most of the poem's assonance appears in lines 4-10. Here, the assonance importantly helps create pleasant, even [euphonious](#) sounds reflecting the speaker's beautiful vision of harmony in nature. For example, the /aw/ sound of "falling" in line 6 and "tall tall," or the long /ee/ sound of "trees" and "needles," may help to suggest the

grandeur and serenity of the speaker's imagined natural utopia. The poem also uses assonance to highlight its key images of this natural world and the people that inhabit it. As with the alliteration of "red" and "rain" in line 9, the long /ay/ sound of "clay" and "rain" underscores the intimate, harmonious relationships between these natural elements. Similarly, like line 12's alliterative phrase "big brown," the short /eh/ sound of "red" and "necks" draws attention to the varied and colorful human beings that inhabit and add to the diversity of nature.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "put," "purtiest"
- **Line 6:** "falling," "soft"
- **Line 7:** "tall," "tall," "trees"
- **Line 8:** "needles"
- **Line 9:** "smell," "red," "clay," "rain"
- **Line 10:** "red," "necks"

METAPHOR

There are no obvious [metaphors](#) in "Daybreak in Alabama." Interpreted literally, the speaker is an aspiring composer simply hoping to someday write songs about a natural utopia where people of all races might coexist harmoniously. Nonetheless, the poem contains elements that might be considered metaphorical.

For one thing, morning is a common [symbol](#) of renewal and hope in literature, and the poem builds on those associations. The fact that the music the speaker wishes to compose is specifically about *dawn* in Alabama reflects the speaker's hopeful desire for a new beginning in the United States, in which all people can live together in peace.

Readers can also interpret the "music" that the speaker talks about as a kind of metaphor for the harmony that the speaker sees in the diversity of nature—and which the speaker envisions by extension existing between different racial groups. In the same way that music creates harmony between different elements at the level of sound, the poem suggests, people can achieve a similar harmony with one another and the world around them.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "When I get to be a colored composer / I'm gonna write me some music"
- **Line 3:** "Daybreak in Alabama"
- **Line 20:** "dawn of music"
- **Lines 20-22:** "when I / Get to be a colored composer / And write about"
- **Lines 22-23:** "daybreak / In Alabama."

ANAPHORA

[Anaphora](#) is one of the poem's most important devices and appears in almost every line.

Perhaps most importantly, all this repetition helps to organize the speaker's thoughts about what the music of "[d]aybreak in Alabama" will be about. The anaphora of the phrases "I'm gonna" and "I'm gonna put," for example, announces the speaker's intentions at every step of the poem. By marking transitions between its various sections, this repeated phrase helps *structure* the poem. For example, the phrase first occurs to establish the speaker's decision to write music (line 2-3) and again when the poem begins detailing what kinds of songs the speaker wants to write (line 4-6):

I'm gonna write me some music about
[...]
And I'm gonna put the purtiest songs in it

Later, the phrase "I'm gonna put" occurs once more to introduce the list of elements from nature the speaker wants to include in these songs (lines 7-13) and finally to introduce the varied list of human skin colors (lines 15-17).

Anaphora becomes even stronger in the long series beginning with the word "And." Each of these lines highlights a distinct element of nature or of the human beings within it:

And the scent of pine needles
And the smell of red clay after rain
And long red necks
And poppy colored faces

"And" so forth!

The repetition at the start of every line helps distinguish each element in the reader's ear, highlighting nature's diversity of sights, colors, and scents. Besides highlighting each, diverse element, this repeated emphasis on the word "And" also serves to underscore the *connections* and *unity* among them. The speaker thus emphasizes the sweeping, all-inclusive nature of the kind of natural diversity and harmony which the speaker wants to depict.

After turning to the subject of different human skin colors in line 14, the speaker appropriately returns to using these "Ands." This helps show how these colors are also included in the speaker's list and sweeping vision of natural diversity:

And I'm gonna put white hands
And black hands and brown and yellow hands
And red clay earth hands in it

The continued anaphora here implies, in other words, that human diversity is a natural extension of that which is already

found in nature.

Finally, the use of anaphora throughout bestows on the overall poem a lyrical, sentimental tone. This tone is appropriate to the poem's yearning for a world that is still, sadly, a long way removed from the speaker's current reality. This feeling is especially intense in lines 18-19, where the speaker elaborates on a vision of natural harmony and togetherness among human beings:

Touching everybody with kind fingers
Touching each other natural as dew

Here, the anaphora also call attention to the act of "[t]ouching" as central to any project of genuine human solidarity and community. During the era of American segregation, the poem makes the striking point that there is nothing more natural than this kind of intimate, human-to-human contact.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "I'm gonna"
- **Line 4:** "And I'm gonna put"
- **Line 6:** "And"
- **Line 7:** "I'm gonna put"
- **Line 8:** "And"
- **Line 9:** "And"
- **Line 10:** "And"
- **Line 11:** "And"
- **Line 12:** "And"
- **Line 13:** "And"
- **Line 15:** "And"
- **Line 16:** "And"
- **Line 17:** "And"
- **Line 18:** "Touching"
- **Line 19:** "Touching"
- **Line 22:** "And"

REPETITION

In addition to its frequent use of [anaphora](#), the poem also [repetition](#) more broadly. Overall, this repetition makes the poem feel all the more musical and lyrical, and it also contributes to the speaker's longing, sentimental tone.

Take line 7: the phrase "tall tall trees," where "tall" is immediately repeated for emphasis, is an example of a form of repetition known as [epizeuxis](#):

- On one level, this just emphasizes the impressive height of the trees.
- On another, it adds to the speaker's intimate, spontaneous style, since this kind of emphatic repetition feels like the kind of thing one would hear in everyday speech.

The speaker also uses repetition to reflect the poem's major themes. Line 14 provides an interesting example:

Of black and white black white black people

Here, the rapid, alternating repetition of the words "black" and "white" highlights the human diversity that the speaker hopes to celebrate through song. Alternating rapidly also blends these words together, embodying the speaker's wish that such people might come to harmoniously interact and coexist.

The poem continues to repeat words in quick succession as the speaker elaborates on the human diversity that will be expressed in this music. These lines feature [diacope](#) of the word "hands" as well as [polysyndeton](#) (the repetition of "and"):

And I'm gonna put white hands
And black hands and brown and yellow hands
And red clay earth hands in it

This repetition highlights the sheer *variety* of these hands—and, of course of the human beings attached to them. At the same time, it underscores that all these different people have something in *common*: their "hands," and by extension their shared humanity. The polysyndeton of "and" makes it feel as though the list could go on and on, while the turn to "red clay earth hands" links this diversity of "hands" directly to nature. In doing so, the poem possibly suggests that for these human beings to be in harmony with one another is also to be one with the natural world of which they are all a part.

Also note how some words that appear in the poem's first half resurface in the second. Examples of this include the phrase "red clay" in line 9 and line 17 and the word "dew" in line 6 and line 19:

- This creates subtle echoes throughout and gives the poem a sense of internal harmony, perhaps reflecting the kind of beautiful music the speaker hopes to write.
- A second, related effect is that it links the beauty of nature focused on in the first half to the diverse human beings portrayed in the second. For example, "dew" in line 6 simply evokes the beauty and serenity found within the natural world; in line 19, that same "dew" is compared to the image of interracial touch and harmony, suggesting that one is just as "natural" as the other.

Finally, many of the words that occur at the poem's beginning reappear at the very end:

- Through the repetition of the words "write" and "music" and the phrases "when I get to be a colored composer" and "about daybreak in Alabama," the

poem gives closure to the speaker's vision.

- Importantly, it returns readers to the speaker's actual reality, where the speaker still yearns for a time when it might be possible to celebrate racial diversity and harmony. It reminds readers that the speaker's music, and the beautiful new beginning which it represents, is still nothing but a dream—far removed from current society and the speaker's lived experience.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When I get to be a colored composer"
- **Line 2:** "write," "music"
- **Lines 2-3:** "about / Daybreak in Alabama"
- **Line 6:** "dew"
- **Line 7:** "tall tall"
- **Line 9:** "red clay"
- **Line 14:** "black," "white," "black," "white," "black"
- **Line 15:** "white," "hands"
- **Line 16:** "black," "hands," "hands"
- **Line 17:** "red clay"
- **Line 19:** "dew"
- **Line 20:** "music"
- **Lines 20-21:** "when I / Get to be a colored composer"
- **Line 22:** "write"
- **Lines 22-23:** "about daybreak / In Alabama."

ENJAMBMENT

There's almost no punctuation at all in the poem, which lends it a free-flowing, casual feel. While some of these punctuation-less lines have an implied pause at the end, there are also a few moments of clear [enjambment](#). The poem primarily uses these enjambed lines to play with rhythm at important moments—either to emphasize certain images or reflect the speaker's bittersweet tone.

For example, take the enjambment at the end of line 2:

I'm gonna write me some music **about**
Daybreak in Alabama

After a subtle moment of suspense, where the reader anticipates what the speaker's music will be "about," the next line swoops in, perhaps a bit surprisingly, emphasizing the glorious new dawn of the speaker's vision. In a sense, the poem reveals the idea of daybreak in the same way one might see a ray of sunlight suddenly appear on the horizon.

The lack of enjambment in the long series of lines that follows is also important. Again, there's no punctuation here, but readers can sense the implied pauses between all these complete grammatical phrases. This allows every line to breathe and stand on its own, emphasizing each, distinct element in the

speaker's picture of natural diversity. The poem thus allows readers to dwell on each particular image while also showing how these distinct images nonetheless come together to produce a vibrant, diverse whole.

An enjambed line finally appears as the speaker shifts to focus more fully on the subject of different human skin colors:

And the field daisy eyes
Of black and white black white black people

By using a line that flows over seamlessly from the "field daisy eyes" to the subject of "black and white" people, the poem suggests a surprising continuity between the diversity of nature and the diversity of people.

Finally, in conjunction with [repetition](#), Hughes uses three enjambments at the end of the poem:

In that dawn of music when I
Get to be a colored composer
And write about daybreak
In Alabama.

Although the words are ones the reader has seen before, the enjambments are new. Since the reader here knows what words to expect, the effect is not one of surprise, but instead of a gentle letdown as the speaker's expressive speech subsides and the poem comes to a bittersweet end.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "about / Daybreak"
- **Lines 13-14:** "eyes / Of"
- **Lines 20-21:** "I / Get"
- **Lines 21-22:** "composer / And"
- **Lines 22-23:** "daybreak / In"

SIMILE

The poem's [similes](#) help the speaker suggest ways in which human beings can strive to imitate the beauty, gentleness, tranquility, and harmony of nature.

These similes appear in three places in the poem. The first two pop up when the poem characterizes the songs the speaker wants to write:

Rising out of the ground like a swamp mist
And falling out of heaven like soft dew

These similes express the speaker's wish to compose songs so earthy and natural that they seem to imitate "swamp mist" and "soft dew"—that is, aspects of nature itself. By wishing that the speaker's songs might be like nature, the poem implicitly *values* things that are "natural," laying the ground for the poem's later

point that human diversity is valuable and "natural," and that it is an extension of nature's own diversity.

The third simile appears much later in line 19, where hands of all skin colors touching are described as being as "natural as dew." The simile drives home the point that collaboration and community across races, though not a reality yet, would be analogous to the beauty inherent in nature. The poem thus implicitly sets up the natural world, with its beauty and diversity, as a model for humans to imitate.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Rising out of the ground like a swamp mist"
- **Line 6:** "And falling out of heaven like soft dew"
- **Line 19:** "Touching each other natural as dew"

ASYNDETON

There is only one instance of [asyndeton](#) in "Daybreak in Alabama." It occurs, however, at the climactic moment in the poem where the speaker shifts from celebrating the diversity of nature to that of humankind:

Of black and white black white black people

Here, the series of adjectives "white black white black" have no conjunctions between them; one follows the other in a rapid pattern. In conjunction with the [repetition](#) here, the asyndeton adds to the breathless expressiveness and spontaneity from the speaker at this moment. It builds the sense that the speaker is becoming more and more caught up in the glorious vision of interracial harmony. At the same time, on a more figurative level, it packs the words "black" and "white" closely together. This further suggests how, rather than remaining separate, black and white people might come to be one "people."

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "white black white black people"

POLYSYNDETON

Though it is in some sense the opposite, [polysyndeton](#) performs largely the same functions as [asyndeton](#) in the poem. The [anaphora](#) that spans the speaker's list of things to include in this music is also an example of polysyndeton, and it adds a sense of steadily building rhythm to the poem.

The other striking moment of polysyndeton runs from lines 15-17:

And I'm gonna put white hands
And black hands and brown and yellow hands
And red clay earth hands

This relentless accumulation adds to the expressive energy of the speaker's speech at the poem's climax. By stringing together more and more kinds of "hands" in this way, the poem also gives the impression of an ever-growing list, reflecting the speaker's wish to celebrate and unify a wide range of racial diversity through the harmony of music.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-17:** "And the scent of pine needles / And the smell of red clay after rain / And long red necks / And poppy colored faces / And big brown arms / And the field daisy eyes / Of black and white black white black people / And I'm gonna put white hands / And black hands and brown and yellow hands / And red clay earth hands in it"



VOCABULARY

Colored (Line 1, Line 21) - In the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, this was a term used to refer to Black people in the United States. Though it was often the preferred term at the time Hughes was writing, the word is currently considered an ethnic slur. Hughes actually cut it from a later publication of the poem.

Purtiest (Line 4) - This is a spelling of the word "prettiest" the way it might be pronounced in certain Southern U.S. accents. The word suggests the way people might speak in Alabama, as well as the down-to-earth, plainspoken tone of the speaker.

Dew (Line 6, Line 19) - Dew refers to tiny drops of water that slowly form on cool surfaces overnight. Dew is often seen glittering on the leaves of plants or the petals of flowers in the morning. It therefore not only suggests daybreak but, as in line 6, the gentleness and splendor of nature. In line 19, it is used in a simile to suggest that racial unity and harmony would be just as natural as drops of water collecting on leaves during the night.

Poppy colored (Line 11) - The speaker uses this term to refer to faces that are the color of poppies, which are a kind of bright red flower.

Field daisy (Line 13) - This is a common name for a flower with white petals and a bright yellow center.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

With no fixed [meter](#) or [rhyme scheme](#), "Daybreak in Alabama" doesn't stick to any traditional formal structures. This *lack* of structure is interesting in itself, however. The poem is not divided into [stanzas](#) but instead composed of 23 lines of [free verse](#) running in one continuous block from start to finish. With

the notable exception of the final end-stop, it also has a striking lack of punctuation.

This *lack* of form adds to the poem's plainspoken and casually intimate quality. Rather than a highly premeditated and formal declaration, the poem offers readers the impression of an outpouring that is spontaneous and straight from the heart.

The poem's continuous, unpunctuated lines are also perhaps meant to evoke the smooth, natural flow of music. The poem flows on unimpeded from one image of nature to the next, reflecting how nature harmoniously brings all things together, and the speaker's songs might do the same. It is possible that any punctuation marks, stanza divisions, or clear syntactic breaks would have disrupted this effect of a continuous and harmonious whole.

METER

"Daybreak in Alabama" has no consistent [meter](#). It is written in [free verse](#), which keeps things feeling casual and intimate—like the reader is listening to a friend talk about a dream.

The poem is filled with interesting rhythm, however, as Hughes plays with [enjambments](#), stress patterns, and line lengths. For example, note the parallel [spondees](#)—poetic feet with two stressed syllables in a row—at the end of lines 5 and 6:

Rising out of the ground like a **swamp mist**
And falling out of heaven like **soft dew**

These pairs of stresses make these images of natural tranquility, gentleness, and peace all the more striking for the reader.

Like many writers of free verse, Hughes also varies line lengths to control the poem's rhythm. Consider lines 10-13, each one short and with only three **stresses** apiece:

And **long red necks**
And **poppy colored faces**
And **big brown arms**
And the **field daisy eyes**

These lines create a rapid, accumulating rhythm. This rhythm, in turn, reinforces the impression of a spontaneous, ever-expanding list of items being folded one after the other into the inclusive harmony of nature.

RHYME SCHEME

"Daybreak in Alabama" has no [rhyme scheme](#). In fact, the poem does not contain any rhymes at all!

Traditional formal structures like rhyme can feel, at times, forced and artificial. In avoiding rhyme, the poem evokes the feeling of plain, spontaneous speech. The poem's unrhymed, [free verse](#) lines make the speaker's expression feel all the more genuine and authentic, as though the speaker is laying out a

deep and earnest wish for a future free from racial prejudice.



SPEAKER

Given the speaker's wish to be a "colored composer," it is fair enough to read the speaker as being the poet, Langston Hughes, himself: a Black artist who wrote often about racism and inequality.

The poem never explicitly states this, however, and Hughes in fact cut the word "colored" from a later publication of the poem. Readers can thus more generally assume that the speaker is a person who is living in, or intimately familiar with, Alabama during the era of racial segregation. The speaker comes across as someone who has witnessed the reality of racial prejudice, and who desperately yearns for a new dawn—a fresh start. The speaker might be an actual aspiring musical composer, or simply an idealist using the idea of music as a convenient [metaphor](#) for racial harmony.



SETTING

"Daybreak in Alabama" has multiple settings, some of which are more ambiguous/[metaphorical](#) and others more concrete.

Broadly speaking, the poem is set in the speaker's present. The speaker imagines a *future* when they can write songs celebrating racial harmony, but that future, importantly, has yet to arrive within the world of the poem.

The *content* of the speaker's songs, meanwhile, is more specifically set during some imagined future *dawn* when people of all races exist in harmony with nature and with one another. The specific mention of "[d]aybreak" represents a new beginning, when people might be free of racial prejudice and coexist in peace.

Of course, readers can also take Alabama, where "pine needles" and daisies grow, as the *physical* setting for this future utopia. The Alabama setting is appropriate, given the state's history of slavery and strict policies of segregation at the time Hughes was writing.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Daybreak in Alabama" was initially published in the literary journal *Unquote* in 1940. The poem must have had a special importance to Langston Hughes, who later decided to include it as the last poem in his final book of poetry, *The Panther and the Lash* (1967).

Hughes was one of the leading poets of a period of literary and artistic history known as the Harlem Renaissance. This period

saw a flourishing of Black art, literature, and culture centered in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. At this time, prominent poets like Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer tried to find new ways of expressing Black experiences.

Hughes in particular was known for his use of colloquial speech in his [free verse](#) or jazz- and blues-inspired poems, as well as his attempts to give expression to a collective Black experience in America. He admired Walt Whitman, who is sometimes known as the father of free verse in American poetry and who similarly tried to represent a collective American experience.

"Daybreak in Alabama" brings together some of Hughes's go-to themes: music, ethnic identity, racial prejudice, and solidarity. At the same time, "Daybreak in Alabama" differs from much of Hughes's work in important ways. For one thing, many of Hughes's other poems use music to cultivate a distinctive Black literary voice—as in his poems "[Dream Variations](#)" and "[Morning-After](#)," inspired by jazz and blues music. In "Daybreak in Alabama," music appears instead as a way of imagining a harmony that might exist across racial boundaries. Similarly, whereas many of Hughes's poems express uniquely Black experiences or themes of pride, resilience, and defiance, this poem expresses hope for a future where all racial conflict might come to an end.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though not published until 1940, the poem carries over much of the passion and energy from the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. This movement added vigor to struggles for Black American civil rights in the first half of the 20th century.

This poem was, however, written well before the later civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which would seek to bring institutional discrimination to an end by granting Black Americans equal rights under the law. At the time Hughes was writing, segregation was still in full force. Across the United States, Black Americans lived as second-class citizens, kept separate from the white majority population and forced to contend with rampant racism, disenfranchisement, and marginalization. Segregation and discrimination were especially enforced in the Deep South, including in states like Alabama, South Carolina, Louisiana, Georgia, and Mississippi.

Today, it is perhaps too easy to forget just how radical a poem like "Daybreak in Alabama" must have been to contemporary audiences. In Hughes's time, many would have seen the idea of different colored hands "[t]ouching" as inappropriate or strange. By suggesting that racial unity and harmony is actually "natural as dew," the poem makes the provocative point that it is the segregationist system which is, in fact, unnatural.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [Overview of Jim Crow segregation](#) – Find out more about the laws and policies of segregation in the 19th and 20th centuries. (<https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws>)
- [A Musical Adaptation of the Poem](#) – Listen to this musical adaptation of Hughes's poem composed by Ricky Ian Gordon and sung by Audra MacDonald. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjJJ7m6Zm9k>)
- [A Short Biography of Langston Hughes](#) – Find out more about Langston Hughes through this biography covering his life and work. (<https://poets.org/poet/langston-hughes>)
- [The Poem Out Loud](#) – Listen to an interpretation of "Daybreak of Alabama" by Tyree Walker, an actor from Alabama. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N7SkVXJRSil&ab_channel=FamousInNYVideoFamousInNYVideo)
- [The Harlem Renaissance](#) – Learn more about the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and '30s. (<https://www.britannica.com/event/Harlem-Renaissance-American-literature-and-art>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LANGSTON HUGHES POEMS

- [Democracy](#)
- [Dreams](#)
- [Dream Variations](#)
- [Harlem](#)
- [I, Too](#)
- [Let America Be America Again](#)
- [Mother to Son](#)
- [The Ballad of the Landlord](#)
- [Theme for English B](#)
- [The Negro Speaks of Rivers](#)
- [The Weary Blues](#)



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