Harlem Hopscotch

SUMMARY

Put one foot on the ground, then jump in the air; the pavement is too hot to keep your feet on it for long. The good things in this world are for the people who can afford them. Now take another hop, to the left. In this world, every person has to look out for themselves.

Jump in the air, then land back on the ground with both feet. Since you're Black, you'd better keep moving. You're out of food and you have to pay the rent soon. Swear and weep, then jump even further, this time over two squares.

No one can find a job. Stay still for a count of three, then contort yourself around and wrench your body in different directions. If you go over the line, they'll get rid of you. That's the whole point of this game of jumping and hopping.

When both your feet are flat on the ground, you've stopped jumping, so the game is over. Other people say this means I lost the game. I say this means I won.

THEMES

RACISM AND POVERTY

In "Harlem Hopscotch," the speaker uses a game of hopscotch as an extended metaphor to explore what it means to grow up Black and poor in America. The speaker gives a series of directions about jumping and hopping that are recognizable from the popular children's game of the poem's title. Yet it is clear that in this case, the "game" is actually a set of rules that have to do with surviving prejudice and poverty. Black children growing up in poverty are forced to learn far more than the rules of kids' games, the poem argues, as they must also learn how to navigate a racist society.

The context of the poem is important here: Harlem is a historically Black neighborhood in New York City, and the poem is addressed to a Black child. Black Americans have experienced pervasive discrimination, unemployment, and poverty, and the poem's "rules" are a reaction to this specific context.

To that end, the speaker establishes the class dynamics of American society by revealing that there's a difference between the haves and have-nots—the "ones that's got," or the rich, and everyone else. People in such a society are also selfish and only looking out for themselves—which implies, in turn, that in order to survive the speaker's addressee needs to learn to be self-sufficient as well.

But the poem isn't just about navigating poverty; it is specifically about how racism *perpetuates* and *exacerbates* that poverty. The two are inextricably linked; poverty in Black communities, including the neighborhood of Harlem, has its origins in the legacy of slavery and in an interlocking web of racist violence, segregation, and discrimination that forced Black Americans into neighborhoods such as Harlem, then denied them fair rents, jobs, and safe living conditions.

It is against this backdrop that the speaker relays the rules of the game. "Since you black," the speaker says, "don't stick around"—a statement that suggests that Black people are unsafe and can never stop moving, never stop working and fighting just to get by. "Food is gone, the rent is due," the speaker says, yet Black people must keep pushing onward, their only relief in the form of letting out a "Curse and cry."

Finally, the metaphor of the game makes clear just how painful and harmful—how far from a game—the realities of racism and poverty actually are. For example, the speaker's instruction to "Hold for three, then twist and jerk" conveys a sense of excruciating helplessness and struggle. The rules mentioned throughout the poem, telling the addressee to "hop," "jump," and undergo difficult, unsustainable contortions, conveys a sense of how painful and impossible it is for Black people to follow the rules that a racist society dictates. Yet the poem also makes clear that if they "cross the line," and fail to follow these rules, they will be "count[ed] … out," or tossed aside.

Ultimately, then, the poem shows how Black children must learn the rules of a racist society, but also that these rules, untenable as they are, do not ensure their safety or survival. On the contrary, the poem's metaphor makes clear that for Black Americans, surviving in this society involves excruciating effort and pain, but also chance.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

FREEDOM AND EMPOWERMENT

As "Harlem Hopscotch" explores the impact of racism and poverty, it examines the constrictions that a racist society imposes on Black people. The poem implies that for people in such an oppressive system, choice and freedom are largely illusions, since all of one's options exist within a tightly confined reality. What people *can* choose, the poem suggests, is how they view themselves—and one can also make the choice to reject the system altogether.

The hopscotch game that provides the framework for the poem immediately conjures an image of a series of boxes, arranged into a hopscotch court. These boxes can be read as

representing the restrictions of racism and poverty. The lines of the boxes call to mind the historical practice of drawing lines on city maps to maintain residential segregation, a process known as redlining. These lines dictated where Black Americans could live, legally restricting them to neighborhoods such as Harlem.

Additionally, the poem associates the boxes of the metaphorical hopscotch court with other racialized restrictions. For instance, at one point the speaker says, "If you black, don't stick around." This moment can be read as representing the experience many people of color have had of being prohibited (legally or extralegally) from predominantly white spaces.

Later, the speaker remarks, "Cross the line, they count you out." Within the poem, "cross[ing] the line" means crossing the line of the hopscotch box. Yet it also calls to mind crossing a segregationist line into a white business or a white part of town. Additionally, it could represent breaking the law within the context of racist policing and discriminatory sentencing. To "cross the line," the poem makes clear, means to be "count[ed] … out" whether by being incarcerated or facing violent reprisal, being "counted out" of society or life entirely.

The poem emphasizes that people living within conditions of racism and poverty didn't choose these conditions and don't have the power or freedom to truly change them. When the people within this game experience hardship, such as when the "food is gone, the rent is due" or when "all the people [are] out of work," the only option they have is to "curse and cry and then jump two," or "hold for three, then twist and jerk." In other words, they can respond emotionally and try to change their circumstances—by working even harder, for example, as the phrase "then jump two" implies—yet they are still constrained within the overall system. The poem emphasizes this lack of true choice by only offering one way of responding to each situation.

At the poem's ending, though, the speaker implies that what people *can* choose is how they view themselves, and maybe how they relate to the system as a whole. In the poem's last couplet, which stands out from the rest of the poem's quatrains, the speaker says, "They think I lost. I think I won." This is the first moment in the poem where an "I" appears, differentiating the speaker from the general rules and the "they" that has occurred elsewhere in the poem.

The speaker further differentiates themselves from this "they" by emphasizing that no matter what "they" think about the speaker, the speaker thinks that "I won." This indicates that despite all the oppressive circumstances and degradation the speaker has endured, the speaker has retained the ability to have a kind of internal independence and self-respect.

The poem's ending also implies that the speaker might have decided to stop "playing the game," in the sense of stepping off of the hopscotch court, but maybe also in the sense of refusing to follow these rules dictated by a racist society. The ending of the poem, then, suggests that the speaker has obtained a kind of freedom.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

One foot down, ...
... ones that's got.

The title and first two lines of "Harlem Hopscotch" establish the poem's setting and its extended metaphor. First, the title locates the poem in Harlem, a historically Black neighborhood in New York City. This lets the reader know that the speaker, and implicitly the addressee, are probably Black Americans living in Harlem at the time the poem was written in 1969. As a direct consequence of systemic racism and segregation, Black Americans have experienced pervasive discrimination and poverty, realities that the poem will go on to explore.

The second word of the title, "Hopscotch," alludes to a children's game played throughout the U.S. In the game, the players draw (usually with chalk) a hopscotch court of a series of connected squares; the person playing then has to hop and jump through these squares without stepping over a line. Since it is included in the title, the word suggests that the poem will explore this common children's game. Yet the combination of "Hopscotch" with "Harlem," which the alliteration of /h/ sounds emphasizes, suggests that the poem's subject is not just any *ordinary* game of hopscotch, but rather what this game means or represents within the community of Harlem.

The first two lines of the poem ("One foot down … that's got") develop this idea, as they continue to alternate between allusions to the rules of hopscotch and the realities of life in Harlem. Importantly, these lines also set up the prevailing mode of the poem, as the speaker issues a series of instructions to the person playing, implicitly a Black child.

The first line—"One foot down, then hop! It's hot"—sounds like rules from a regular game of hopscotch; the speaker is telling the addressee to put one foot on the ground, then jump in the air. Yet the short sentence "It's hot" at the end of the line creates an immediate sense that there is something difficult involved in this game; the pavement is too hot, the poem suggests, but perhaps also there is a painful reality underfoot, requiring the person playing to keep moving, to not stay still for long.

The alliteration of /h/ sounds in "hop" and "hot" recalls the /h/ sounds in the title, connecting these initial instructions to "hop" with the heat of the ground and Harlem itself.

The second line then rhymes with the first, a rhyme accentuated by the assonant short /aw/ sound of "hop" in line 1. This rhyme sustains the sense of a children's game, since it sounds like a song that children would sing while playing a game at recess.

Yet the words in the line contradict this; the "rule" the speaker issues, here, is not just any rule from a kid's game. Rather, it has to do with society as a whole, and a society of "haves" and "have-nots" in which the good things—including healthcare, safe housing, food, a good education— are reserved for those with the wealth to afford them. In a society built on systemic racism, this overwhelmingly means white people.

From the outset, then, the poem makes clear that the game it invokes is not just hopscotch. Rather, the game will function as an extended metaphor for a set of rules about class and race in America, and how Black Americans must try to navigate these rules.

LINES 3-4

Another jump, now ...
... Everybody for hisself.

The speaker builds on the first two lines, continuing to invoke both a rule that could be from an ordinary game of hopscotch and a rule that has to do with American society at large. "Another jump, now to the left," the speaker says in line 3, telling the person playing to hop again, now toward a left square. Then, in line 4, the speaker tells the addressee, "Everybody for hisself," letting the addressee know that within the world of the poem, everyone must look out for themselves.

Altogether, the opening stanza of the poem is deceptively simple. The AA rhyme scheme of the opening two lines ("hot"/"got") is followed by a BB rhyme scheme in the second two lines ("left," "hisself"). The stanza is also balanced in its incorporation of caesurae. Lines 1 ("One foot … hot") and 3 ("Another jump … left") both contain caesurae, in the comma following "down," the exclamation point following "hop," and the comma following "jump." Lines 2 ("Good things … got") and 4 ("Everybody … hisself"), however, don't contain caesurae. This creates a kind of balance in the rhythm and pacing of the poem.

Meanwhile, the poem incorporates an alternating structure: the first and third lines of the stanza sound like rules from a regular game of hopscotch. The second and fourth lines offer a contrast, as both refer to rules of a society in which the good things are reserved for those who can afford them, and everyone must fend for themselves.

Yet something more complex also starts to build in the poem at this point. First, while the AA rhyme scheme that opened the stanza is a regular and complete rhyme, the rhyme sounds in lines 3 and 4 are closer to slant rhyme, with "hisself" echoing, but not *completely* rhyming, with "left." This divergence from the fixed rhyme scheme that the opening lines set up introduces an element of tension or discord in the poem: the reader begins to sense that within the world of the poem, all is not as balanced, even, or predictable as it first appeared.

,Secondly, it is worth remembering that given the framework of Harlem and hopscotch in the poem, the speaker's implicit addressee is a Black child. It is notable, then, that the rules the speaker is invoking are difficult, painful realities; the child is being told, in essence, that American society is basically selfish and predicated on individual profit. In such a world, this child too will have to look out for themselves and figure out how to survive more or less on their own. While white people of wealth and privilege can grow up shielded from such realities, the poem implies, the Black addressee of the poem doesn't have this luxury. The playful tone of the poem sharply contrasts with and highlights these divergent experiences.

LINES 5-6

In the air, ...
... don't stick around.

Lines 5-6 ("In the air … stick around") bringing the realities that the speaker's addressee must learn to navigate into even sharper relief.

First, in line 5, the speaker says, "In the air, now both feet down." Like lines 1 ("One foot down … hot") and 3 ("Another jump … left"), this line sounds like an instruction from a game of hopscotch. It is worth noting, though, that this instruction has increased in intensity and difficulty from those issued in the first stanza. There, the speaker told the addressee to put one foot on the ground, and hop with the other foot, then do the same thing to the left. Here, the speaker is telling the addressee to hop in the air with both feet and then land with both feet on the ground, an action that requires more intense energy. In a subtle way, then, the poem lets the reader know that the "game" the addressee is navigating is increasingly difficult and tiring.

In line 6, the speaker makes this difficulty even clearer, invoking race directly for the first time. "Since you black," the speaker says, "don't stick around." The rules of society are different, the poem makes clear, depending on one's race. Within this line, the phrase "don't stick around" could be read in several ways. It could refer to Black Americans' experience of being barred from and unwelcome in predominantly white spaces; it also suggests that for Black Americans, one must keep moving, working, and fighting every day to be able to survive.

The sounds of these lines emphasize their meaning. First, while the lines *almost* rhyme—"down" is a close rhyme to "around"—they are not perfect rhymes. This slight dissonance recalls the slant rhyme at the end of stanza two, with "left" and "hisself," building on the tension those lines introduced. While this tension is subtle in the poem, it is also notable; it creates a sense that the rules the addressee is told to follow are apparently direct and simple, but they are also intrinsically

imbalanced, uneven, and unsustainable. In this way, then, the slant rhymes reflect the basic instability of the racist society as a whole, which is predicated on inequality and oppression. Sooner or later, the poem implies, something will have to shift.

Meanwhile, alliteration and consonance in these lines create pairings between words that are also troubling in meaning. The /r/ sound of "air" connects it to "around," suggesting an all-encompassing environment that the speaker and addressee must inhabit. The /b/ sound of "both" is echoed in "black," while the /d/ of "down" then repeats in "don't"—suggesting that for the addressee it is not an option to truly put both feet down for long, or to rest. Finally, the sibilant /s/ sounds of "since" repeats in "stick," connecting the condition of being Black to the necessity of having to keep moving.

LINES 7-8

Food is gone, ...
... then jump two.

These lines restore the poem to a more regular rhyme scheme, as "due" at the end of line 7 ("Food is gone ... due") rhymes exactly with "two" at the end of line 8 ("Curse and cry ... two"). At the same time, and in tension with this regularity, the lines heighten the sense of pain, difficulty, and struggle that the addressee of the poem must go through. "Food is gone, the rent is due," the speaker says in line 7, conveying a sense of an impossible situation. The addressee is out of money and going hungry, yet they must somehow find a way to pay the rent.

According to the rules the speaker goes on to describe, though, the addressee's only option is to "Curse and cry and then jump two." In other words, the person going through such difficulty might briefly express their suffering by crying or cursing, but then their only option is to jump even further, work even harder, to try to overcome their situation.

Notably, at this point several things shift in the poem's structure. In stanza 1, the speaker alternated between rules that sounded like regular rules of hopscotch and rules of society as a whole. In stanza 2, though, the societal rule "Since you black, don't stick around" is followed immediately by another condition that the speaker's addressee must endure--being out of food and having to pay the rent while going hungry.

By placing these two lines next to each other, the poem makes clear that the addressee's experience of being out of food and struggling to pay the rent is connected to the line before, in which they were told that since they are Black, they shouldn't "stick around." This phrase "don't stick around" could well be a phrase the addressee heard from racist employers or landlords when trying to apply for a job or move out of their circumstances. That the addressee is Black, then, is directly related to the hardship this line evokes, because society as a whole created these conditions for Black people and has kept Black Americans entrapped within cycles of poverty, denying them opportunities or options.

Another important shift in the poem appears in its line endings. Previously, all the lines were not only end-stopped but *full stopped*, coinciding with the end of a sentence. Here, for the first time, a sentence extends into the next line, with the comma following "rent is due" at the end of line 7 leading the reader into the addressee's only possible response in line 8, "Curse and cry and then jump two." This lack of a full stop enacts what the poem describes, as the addressee doesn't have the choice to truly rest or pause but must keep working and striving in order to survive.

This sense of necessary ongoing, continual movement is also emphasized by the use of polysyndeton in line 8:

> Curse and cry and then jump two.

Here, all the things the addressee is told to do are linked together by the conjunction "and," with no caesurae. This suggests, just as the longer sentence suggests, that the addressee's only option is to keep going and working harder.

Finally, it is worth noting that at this moment, which occurs halfway through the poem, the extended metaphor of the game and the realities the speaker invokes (life in racist society) come together fully for the first time. The addressee's directions to "jump two" sound like directions from a game of hopscotch; yet the comma connecting these instructions to the previous line, as well as the instruction to "Curse and cry," make clear that the addressee's responses are not really a game at all, but an effort to navigate these realities according to the rules of society.

LINES 9-10

All the people ...
... twist and jerk.

As the poem moves into its third stanza, the realities and societal rules that the addressee must cope with are revealed to be even more disturbing. "All the people out of work," the speaker says in line 9, building on the earlier descriptions of poverty and hardship. Here, the speaker makes clear that this situation is one impacting an entire community, in which "all the people" are affected and unable to find work and income.

Yet the "rule" for how the people within the poem must respond to these circumstances is just as troubling as the circumstances themselves. "Hold for three," the speaker directs the addressee, "then twist and jerk." As in the second half of stanza 2, these two lines are bridged by a comma at the end of line 9 ("All the people ... work"). The consonant /w/ in "work" and "twist" also emphasizes the connection between the two lines. This comma and consonant sound, connecting the line about people being out of work to the line that follows, let the reader know that the instructions of the "game" for the addressee aren't actually rules of an ordinary game, but rules of how to try to navigate and deal with incredibly difficult circumstances.

And, as this "rule" indicates, the people who are out of work

poem have almost no options of how to respond or change their situation. They might "hold for three"—wait and keep trying to find a job for three days, three weeks, three months. But how long, the poem implicitly asks, can someone wait for a better situation to emerge while being without income, food, and the money to pay the rent?

After this, the speaker goes on to say, "twist and jerk." Here, the words are no longer the simple sounding "jump" and "hop" that occurred earlier in the poem; instead, these verbs convey a sense of excruciating effort and pain, as the addressee is directed to move in unnatural, almost impossible ways to try to move out of their situation. These directions, then, as they build throughout the poem, make clear how painful, unnatural, and finally impossible are the rules dictated to Black people by a racist society—and how, even if they follow these rules, little will truly change in their situation.

While the rhyme scheme is regular here—"work" rhymes with "jerk"—the regularity of the end-rhyme only heightens the lines' disturbing effect. In fact, the lines suggest that underlying these apparently rational rules of society (a "rationality" reflected in the rhyme scheme), are deep, unbearable distortions, dehumanizing both the addressee who is required to go through these contortions and the society that demands such a response.

LINES 11-12

Cross the line, ...
... hopping's all about.

After revealing how painful, untenable, and impossible these societal "rules" truly are, in lines 11-12 ("Cross the line ... all about") the speaker reveals the potential cost of *not* following the rules. "Cross the line, they count you out," the speaker says, conveying a sense that if the addressee—this Black child, and implicitly any Black American—doesn't follow the rules dictated by a racist society, they will be counted "out," whether that means to be incarcerated or counted out of life altogether.

It is important to note that this line communicates the threat that has actually been implicit in all the rules that came before. Since the extended metaphor in the poem is a game of hopscotch, all the directions to "jump," "hop," and land in certain places at certain times include the implicit rule that the addressee must not step over the line. This moment of the poem, then, which shows the consequence for the addressee if they *do* "cross the line," reveals the violence that has been embedded in the rules all along.

Indeed, as the speaker goes on to say in line 12, "That's what hopping's all about." On the surface, here, the speaker seems to be saying that the risk of being counted out is part of the game of hopscotch, part of "hopping." Yet there is also a deeper and more troubling truth that emerges at this point. For all the hopping and jumping that the addressee has been told to do throughout the poem, the speaker implies that even if the addressee follows the rules, the game is finally and ultimately about them being "counted out"—counted out of society, not considered fully human. The rules, then, are not truly rules for survival, but rules intended to keep Black Americans oppressed and marginalized.

It is notable that the poem has shifted again in its structure at this point. Although this stanza follows a regular rhyme scheme in its end rhymes ("work" rhymes with "jerk" and "out" rhymes with "about"), the alternating structure between rules of hopscotch and societal rules that opened the poem has, by this point, changed. Instead, the last three lines of this stanza apparently describe the rules of the "game"—yet, as the speaker has made clear, what the poem is *actually* describing at this point are the rules the game metaphorically represents, those rules of a racist society.

At the level of its sounds, these lines also bring together elements that appeared previously in the poem. The hard /c/ sounds in "cross" and "count" recall the consonant sounds in "curse" and "cry," connecting the four words together. Meanwhile, the /h/ sound of the apparently playful word "hopping" recalls the /h/ sounds in stanza 1, in "hop," "hot," and "hisself." By this point, though, the meaning of "hopping" has been transformed, as the poem has revealed that it is not about a child's game at all, but about the unbearable, impossible contortions Black Americans are expected to go through to survive in a system designed to keep them down.

LINES 13-14

Both feet flat, ...
... think I won.

This couplet stands apart from the rest of the poem, which is written in quatrains. Also, it is notable that since the poem as a whole is 14 lines long, its length alludes to the form of a sonnet. The closing couplet, then, could be read as the closing couplet of a sonnet, which within that form is intended to offer a kind of resolution or answer to the problem the poem has posed.

In this case, the speaker suggests that the answer is to stop playing the game. "Both feet flat," the speaker says, "the game is done." The image of "both feet" as "flat" could, at one level, convey an image of death, if the addressee has stopped moving, and if the "game" is understood as life itself. At the same time, this image can also be read as suggesting that the addressee has simply stopped playing and stepped off the hopscotch court through an act of agency and choice.

Since both the player's feet are flat on the ground, the speaker goes on to say, "They think I lost. I think I won." This closing line represents a stunning turn in the poem, as an "I" appears for the first time. Here, it becomes apparent that the speaker was not only issuing directions; the speaker was also—at least for a time—*following* these directions. Now, though, the speaker has chosen to stand apart, even if this means that "they"—which could stand for society as a whole—thinks this means that the

speaker lost. In fact, as the speaker insists, "I think I won."

This closing line has several effects. First, the introduction of the "I" can suddenly make the reader aware that an "I" *hasn't* appear up until now; that the speaker was in a sense undifferentiated from the society that was dictating these rules. Here, the speaker's invocation of an "I" reveals that something has changed, that the speaker has chosen something different.

The caesura in this line also heightens the sense of differentiation between the "they" of the larger, racist society, and the speaker, as it creates a pause exactly halfway through the line, dividing what "they" think and what the speaker thinks. This is also an instance of antithesis, as the speaker's statement, "I think I won," directly contradicts the opinion of the "they," the larger society. The parallel structure of the two sentences emphasizes this contrast.

Finally, it becomes clear at this point that, in a sense, there is another option for the speaker, and for others entrapped within similar circumstances. The ending of the poem suggests that the speaker has rejected the game and its rules altogether. Within the metaphorical context of the poem, this means that the speaker has chosen to reject the racist system dictating those rules and refused to obediently follow them. Instead, the speaker has been able to "win" by standing apart, out of self-respect and a sense of internal freedom.

The extended metaphor of the poem also works to affirm this sense of freedom, because of how the poem's ending can be envisioned spatially. If the implicit image throughout the poem is of a hopscotch court and people trying to painfully navigate to stay within the squares, the implication that the speaker has stepped *off* the court suggests that the speaker has also stepped into a new kind of territory or possibility—which means that the racist system they inherited is not necessarily absolute or all-powerful. Instead, the speaker's choice, independence, and perception about what winning truly means suggests that people who are oppressed *do* have the power to change their circumstances by refusing to abide by the system that created those circumstances in the first place.

SYMBOLS

THE GAME

The game of hopscotch represents a set of societal rules that Black Americans are expected to follow. Hopscotch broadly functions as an extended metaphor in the poem, but the specific phrase "the game," which appears in line 13, can also be understood symbolically in its own right.

If someone is said to be willing to "play the game"—in any context—this usually means that the person attempts to skillfully learn and navigate the rules of that context for personal gain. For instance, someone might be said to "play the game" and behave in a set of accepted ways in order to be considered for a promotion. Within such a context, a degree of cynicism is involved, as the person has decided to act in certain ways not out of a sense of integrity, but to "work the system."

Within the poem, however, it is clear that this "game" is imposed onto Black Americans, who must learn the rules not for individual profit but simply to try to *survive*. Part of the pain that registers within the poem is this sense of entrapment, as the people in the poem undergo impossible contortions to attempt to navigate the societal rules imposed on them.

Finally, people sometimes refer to the "game" of life, and what it means to "win" or "lose" at this "game." All of these senses of "playing the game" are present in the poem. At the end of "Harlem Hopscotch," the speaker actually wins the game of life, and all that it symbolizes, by refusing to follow a set of rules imposed onto them by society—that cynical, oppressive "game"—and instead charting their own course.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "the game"

THE LINE

While much of "Harlem Hopscotch" involves the speaker issuing rules and directions, the poem takes a crucial turn when the speaker reveals what can happen if the person playing missteps and breaks a rule. "Cross the line," the speaker says in line 11, "they count you out."

Within the context of the framing metaphor of hopscotch, this can be read as referring to someone literally stepping over the line of the hopscotch court, which means that they are out of the game. But the idea of crossing the line also works symbolically in the poem. As the poem examines the realities of racism in America, the "line" can be read as the socially constructed dividing line of race, which separates white people, who benefit from white supremacy, from people of color, who are targeted by it.

At a more concrete level, the "line" also alludes to the literal lines of segregation and redlining, which have dictated almost every aspect of Black Americans' lives, including where they have been able to work, live, and go to school. The "line" also symbolizes the law, including contemporary laws that are enforced unequally depending on someone's race, and within a context of discriminatory policing and sentencing. In any of these contexts, a Black American "crossing the line" has meant that they are in danger out being "counted out," whether by being incarcerated or facing another form of violence.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 11:** "Cross the line"

POETIC DEVICES

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The game of hopscotch functions as an extended metaphor, representing the set of rules that Black Americans are expected to follow in order to navigate and survive in a racist society. Importantly, the speaker doesn't let the reader know immediately what the game of hopscotch represents; instead, the metaphor works to slowly develop the meaning of the poem as it unfolds.

"One foot down, then hop! It's hot," the speaker says at the poem's opening, suggesting, at first, that this poem really is just about a game of hopscotch on a hot day. Yet as the poem progresses, it becomes clear that the "rules" the speaker is invoking are all too serious and real, as are the circumstances of poverty, racism, and systemic oppression with which the addressee is expected to cope.

By the poem's ending, the reader has become aware that this "game" is actually the racist system itself, which Black Americans are supposed to navigate by going through painful, impossible contortions. The only way one can "win" in such a context, the speaker suggests at the poem's end, is by refusing to "play the game" altogether, refusing to accept the terms of a system designed to exploit and oppress Black Americans.

The metaphor works, then, to enact what the poem describes. As it unfolds through a sequence of increasingly difficult and untenable rules and directions, the poem suggests that racism and poverty have accumulating effects over time and are ultimately unbearable.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

ALLUSION

"Harlem Hopscotch" makes use of two allusions, both introduced in the poem's title: the neighborhood of Harlem, and the game of hopscotch. First, the title makes it clear that the setting of the poem, and of this "game," is Harlem, a historically Black neighborhood in New York City. In addition to establishing the setting, the name "Harlem" alludes to everything that this neighborhood has represented.

In the first part of the 20th century, Harlem was the home of the Harlem Renaissance, a flourishing of Black literature, art, and music that sought to center Black Americans' experience and articulate a uniquely Black aesthetic, distinct from dominant Eurocentric models of art. The Harlem Renaissance helped to set the stage for the Civil Rights Movement, and later, the Black Arts Movement.

At the same time, the Black inhabitants of Harlem have endured pervasive discrimination and poverty resulting from systemic racism. Both of these aspects of the history of Harlem are important to the poem. "Harlem Hopscotch" explores the inhumanity of an oppressive, racist society, and what it is like to cope with these conditions. Yet it also and ultimately articulates a creative vision of independence and freedom.

Secondly, the poem alludes to the game of hopscotch. A popular game played by children around the U.S.—and around the world—hopscotch involves drawing a hopscotch court made out of a series of connected squares. The person playing must then hop and jump through the court without stepping over a line.

The allusion suggests that the poem is in certain ways about children's experience and what children learn growing up. Through this allusion, along with the realities of racism and poverty that the poem invokes, "Harlem Hopscotch" makes clear that Black children growing up in America must learn far more than ordinary children's games; they must also learn the "rules" of a racist society.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

END-STOPPED LINE

"Harlem Hopscotch" makes use of end-stopped lines throughout. In fact, 12 out of the poem's 14 lines are full stopped, meaning that the line ending coincides with the ending of a sentence and closes with a period.

These end-stopped lines have several effects. First, they work to create rhythm and pacing in the poem, contributing to the ways in which the poem sounds like a children's chant or song sung while playing a game.

The consistent use of end-stop throughout also creates a sense of finality and absoluteness. They imply that the game, and the rules of the game, are already fixed and unchangeable, and that the person playing has no choice but to follow them—until, that is, the speaker decides at the end of the poem to step off the court and stop playing altogether.

It's also worth paying attention to the two instances in the poem when a line ends with a comma rather than a period. These are still end-stops, but their feeling changes slightly. The first instance of this occurs in line 7:

> Food is gone, the rent is due,

Here, a comma bridges the situation the speaker describes with the way the addressee is supposed to respond to this situation,

in line 8:

> Curse and cry and then jump two.

Similarly, a comma also bridges lines 9 and 10, as the speaker notes that "All the people [are] out of work," then tells the addressee (and implicitly the people unable to find a job) to "Hold for three, then twist and jerk."

These commas, while subtle, play an important role in developing the meaning of the poem. They make clear that the conditions of poverty and racism that the speaker is describing are directly related to the "rules" the speaker invokes; in other words, the commas bridging these alternating lines show that the "game" is actually not separate from these realities at all. The "game," in fact, *is* these realities, and how Black Americans are expected to cope with them.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "hot."
- **Line 2:** "got."
- **Line 3:** "left."
- **Line 4:** "hisself."
- **Line 5:** "down."
- **Line 6:** "around."
- **Line 7:** "due,"
- **Line 8:** "two."
- **Line 9:** "work,"
- **Line 10:** "jerk."
- **Line 11:** "out."
- **Line 12:** "about."
- **Line 13:** "done."
- **Line 14:** "won."

CAESURA

In addition to its end-stopped lines, "Harlem Hopscotch" uses caesurae to create rhythm, pacing, and meaning. In the first stanza, lines 1 ("One foot … hot") and 3 ("Another jump … left") both include caesurae, while lines 2 ("Good things … got") and 4 ("Everybody … hisself") don't. Stanza 2 then shifts this pattern, as the first three lines of the stanza include caesurae, while the last line ("Curse and cry … two") does not. In stanza 3, the poem introduces yet another pattern, as the first and fourth lines of the quatrain don't contain caesurae, while the middle two do.

In the first three stanzas, then, the poem includes a balance of lines that do contain some kind of caesurae, or mid-line pause, and lines that do not. The poem changes up where these pauses occur, creating variation that works in tension with the regularity of the rhyme scheme and of the end-stopped lines. The reader, like the speaker and the addressee, then, must navigate a constantly shifting reality within the world of the poem, adapting to the "rules" of pacing as they change and develop.

The poem's final couplet, then, stands apart in that *both* lines contain caesurae. This slows the pace of the poem down, requiring the reader to move through these lines more deliberately. Also, the last line of the poem contains the most prominent caesura within the poem, as a period divides the line exactly in half, with four words on either side of it. The only other line in the poem containing a sentence ending mid-line is the first line ("One foot down, then hop! It's hot").

The poem's closing then, recalls the poem's opening, but in a radically different way. Where at the start of the poem the first sentence, issuing the rules of the game, took up most of the line, here the speaker changes the terms of the poem, introducing an "I" and halting the rules and pattern of the poem completely as the "they" and "I" are divided by the full stop of the caesura:

> They think I lost. I think I won.

"I think I won," the poem ends, and the caesura just before this final sentence emphasizes the speaker's authority. The shift in pacing at the poem's ending makes clear, finally, that the speaker doesn't just *think* that they won; the speaker *has* won, by refusing to follow the established rules and instead asserting their own rhythm and choice.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "down, then hop! It's"
- **Line 3:** "jump, now"
- **Line 5:** "air, now"
- **Line 6:** "black, don't"
- **Line 7:** "gone, the"
- **Line 10:** "three, then"
- **Line 11:** "line, they"
- **Line 13:** "flat, the"
- **Line 14:** "lost. I"

JUXTAPOSITION

The game of hopscotch works as an extended metaphor in "Harlem Hopscotch"; as the poem progresses, it becomes clear that the "game" is not a game at all, but the system designed to oppress and exploit Black Americans, and a set of rules that Black Americans are expected to follow within such a system.

Along with serving as a metaphor, though, the game of hopscotch also works to create a powerful element of juxtaposition in the poem. Since hopscotch is a game usually played by children, and since the poem makes use of a rhyme scheme that recalls the kind of song or chant children might sing at recess, there is a playful tone in "Harlem Hopscotch" from the poem's outset. Yet alongside the excruciating realities the poem evokes—articulated in lines such as "Since you black, don't stick around," "Food is gone, the rent is due," "All the

people out of work," and "Cross the line, they count you out"—this tone becomes both ironic as the poem progresses, highlighting the painfulness of the experiences it recounts.

Importantly, this element of juxtaposition also creates a kind of lightness, wit, and energy that works to carry and convey the weight of these realities. In this sense, juxtaposition in "Harlem Hopscotch" works similarly to elements of juxtaposition in musical forms such as jazz and the blues. These forms of music often use tonal juxtaposition, syncopation—stressing an unexpected note—and even dissonant combinations of sound to capture painful and multilayered realities. Ultimately, the music's ability to convey these realities communicates not only the painfulness of them but also the ability to survive them.

In much the same way, the wit and sharpness of "Harlem Hopscotch" conveys, not only the acute harm of oppression, but also Black Americans' resilience, strength, and survival in the face of this oppression, and a constant creative, imaginative effort to forge a new reality.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

POLYSYNDETON

For much of the "Harlem Hopscotch," the speaker lists directions—or circumstances that the addressee is coping with—without conjunctions or connecting words. For instance, the speaker remarks, in line 7, "Food is gone, the rent is due," eliding the conjunction that might normally occur between these two clauses. By leaving out the conjunction, this sentence becomes an instance of asyndeton. Later, the speaker directs the addressee in line 10 to "Hold for three, then twist and jerk," leaving out the "and" that might often appear before "then" to link the phrases together. Overall, this creates the sense that, within the world of the poem, one thing simply leads to another, inevitably and automatically.

When "and" *does* appear in the poem, then, in line 8, it gives this moment particular emphasis. "Curse and cry and then jump two," the speaker directs the addressee. This is an instance of polysyndeton.

This moment has several effects in the poem. First, it creates a kind of rhythmic variation from the lines surrounding it. Also, it is notable that at this moment in the poem the speaker is telling the addressee how to cope with and respond to conditions of poverty Within this context, the speaker tells the addressee that they can "curse and cry," but then they have to work even harder, jump even further. The use of "and" in this sentence, which connects the three actions together, emphasizes that the person being addressed has to constantly keep working, fighting, and pushing forward just to be able to survive, without the reprieve of a pause or rest. The multiple "ands" make the list feel relentless.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Curse and cry and then jump two."

COLLOQUIALISM

Throughout "Harlem Hopscotch," the speaker uses casual language and colloquialisms. For instance, the speaker tells the addressee that in this society, the "good things" are reserved "for the ones that's got" and "Everybody for hisself," meaning that everyone must look out for themselves. Later, the speaker reminds the Black child being addressed, "Since you Black, don't stick around."

This colloquial language gives the poem a spoken, immediate feel, as though it comes directly from a conversation between two people. Also, by using colloquial language that the addressee will presumably be familiar with, the speaker establishes their audience, indicating that the speaker is speaking from *within* Harlem to someone else who lives in Harlem, out of a shared experience and shared understanding.

Finally, it is notable that since the poem diverges in these colloquialisms from "formal" or "standard" English—in other words, dominant white modes of speaking and writing— the poem refuses, within its very language, to "follow the rules" of the dominant white society. In this way, the language of the poem lets the reader know that the speaker might be *conveying* the rules of this society to the addressee, so the addressee understand the world they must navigate. Yet the speaker also registers, through their use of colloquial language, that they do not fully accept nor identify with these rules.

Where Colloquialism appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Good things for the ones that's got."
- **Line 4:** "Everybody for hisself."
- **Line 6:** "Since you black, don't stick around."
- **Line 9:** "All the people out of work,"

ASSONANCE

"Harlem Hopscotch" contains subtle assonance throughout. These moments of assonance create a sense of music in the poem, contributing to the feeling that this is a sort of chant or song repeated by children while playing a game.

For example, the /aw/ sound of "Hopscotch," in the title, reappears in the first stanza, in "hop," "hot," and "got." In stanza 2, the short /i/ sound repeats in "Since" and "stick," while in lines 11-12 an /ow/ sound repeats in "count," "out," and "about."

Assonance also creates meaning in the poem. Note that in three places, in stanza 1, 2, and 3, a rhyming line ending is predicted by its assonant sound appearing earlier in the line: the short /o/ sound of "hot" and "got" first appears in the stanza in "hop"; later, the /oo/ sound of "food" predicts the rhyme

endings of "due" and "two." Finally, "count" predicts the rhyming line endings of "out" and "about." This has a kind of causal effect in the poem, suggesting that one thing leads to another, just as, within the system the poem describes, one set of conditions leads to a rule that the addressee is expected to follow in order to cope with these conditions.

It is notable, then, when the speaker diverges from this pattern in the closing couplet. Here, the assonant sound of the rhyming line endings, the /o/ sound in "done" and "won," doesn't appear earlier in the stanza. Instead, the speaker repeats the phrase "think I" directly, going beyond assonance to direct repetition. This emphasizes the speaker's ability to refuse to follow the rules, and the game, completely.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "hop," "hot"
- **Line 2:** "got"
- **Line 6:** "Since," "stick"
- **Line 7:** "Food," "due"
- **Line 8:** "two"
- **Line 9:** "people"
- **Line 10:** "three"
- **Line 11:** "count," "out"
- **Line 12:** "about"
- **Line 14:** "think I," "I think I"

ALLITERATION

"Harlem Hopscotch" also includes several notable instances of alliteration. For example, the /h/ sounds of "Harlem" and "Hopscotch" in the poem's title links these two words, suggesting that the hopscotch the poem will describe is not just a game played within Harlem; it is a game that has to do with life and conditions in Harlem as a whole. This /h/ sound then repeats alliteratively throughout the first line with "hop" and "hot" (which are also connected by assonance). This links the idea of the game to the heat and difficulty of the conditions within which it is played.

Later, in line 6, the shared /s/ sounds of "Since" and "stick" evoke a whisper or a hissing sound, which is appropriate given that this line is a warning for Black people not to "stick around."

Hard /c/ sounds alliterate in both stanzas 2 and 3, in "Curse," "cry," "Cross," and "count." This is a sound of halting, hard restriction. As they appear in lines 8 ("Curse and cry and then jump two") and 11 ("Cross the line, they count you out") these sounds work to establish the harsh realities of the poem, conveying a sense of enclosure and entrapment.

Finally, in the closing couplet, /f/ sounds repeat in "feet" and "flat." This instance of alliteration connects the words together and creates a holistic image of the speaker's, and the addressee's, feet flat on the ground.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "hop," "hot"
- **Line 2:** "Good," "got"
- **Line 6:** "Since," "stick"
- **Line 8:** "Curse," "cry"
- **Line 11:** "Cross," "count"
- **Line 13:** "feet," "flat"

ANTITHESIS

In the closing line of "Harlem Hopscotch," the speaker uses the first-person "I" for the first time. In doing so, the speaker also differentiates their own choices from the rules dictated by a racist society. After the poem implies that the speaker has stopped "playing the game" and following these rules, the speaker says that this means "They think I lost. I think I won." This is a moment of antithesis; the speaker uses the parallel structure of the two sentences to emphasize the contrast between what the "they"—society as a whole—thinks of the speaker, and what the speaker thinks.

In addition to emphasizing the difference between society's perception of the speaker and the speaker's own self-perception, this instance of antithesis also asks the reader to reconsider the poem as a whole. Much of the poem progressed, the reader can now realize, according to a set of assumptions: that the racist system and its rules are fixed, universal, and all encompassing; that the speaker and addressee's only agency was in trying to follow these rules and work harder to navigate them.

Yet this turn at the poem's end suggests a radically different vision. As the speaker differentiates themselves from the "they" of society and societal perception, this moment of antithesis also makes clear that while the system exists and is all too real, *its* antithesis, *its* opposite—a society predicated on true integrity, freedom, equality, agency, and choice—is also possible.

Where Antithesis appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "They think I lost. I think I won."

VOCABULARY

Curse (Line 8) - To swear out of frustration, anger, or disappointment.

Jump two (Line 8) - Within the context of the poem and its framing metaphor of a game of hopscotch, to "jump two" means to jump over two squares on the hopscotch court. It is worth noting, though, the particular moment in the poem at which this direction appears. The speaker tells the addressee to "jump two" after acknowledging the reality that the "food is gone" and

the "rent is due." The direction, then, can be understood metaphorically as telling the addressee to work even harder, and try to "jump" even further, in order to survive and be able to make a living.

Hold for three (Line 10) - "Hold for three" can be understood as instructions in hopscotch; the speaker is telling the person playing to stay still for a count of three seconds. However, this direction also occurs right after the speaker has remarked that "all the people" are "out of work." This implies that the speaker is saying that people who are out of work can try to hold on for a certain amount of time—three days, three weeks, or maybe three months. Yet the instruction also makes clear that people within such circumstances can't hold on forever.

Twist and jerk (Line 10) - "Twist" and "jerk" are both bodily movements that convey a sense of extremity and contortion. If someone twists around, this means that they are moving one part of their body in one direction, the other in another direction, in a kind of corkscrew. To "jerk" means to twitch or spasm, usually involuntarily, again conveying a kind of unnatural, painful movement. Both verbs communicate a sense that the person experiencing these movements is responding to a kind of pain or violence, yet not able to truly respond to the source of the pain.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is written in three rhyming quatrains, followed by a closing rhyming couplet. This creates a sense of structure for the poem; like a game of hopscotch, the poem abides by a set of even "squares," each four lines in length—until, that is, it changes the rules at its ending, switching to a couplet as the speaker too steps away from the "game."

The poem's music, with its slant rhymes and end rhymes, also draws on elements of jazz and the blues. Interestingly, since the poem sounds in certain ways like a song—and perhaps like a song passed down over generations—it also alludes to the form of a ballad. Ballads were traditional songs that developed in France, Britain, and Ireland in the Middle Ages, used to tell stories through music and often repeated over the course of generations. Later, Black Americans adapted elements of ballads in the development of spirituals.

Finally, it is important that "Harlem Hopscotch" is 14 lines long, the length of a traditional sonnet. The poem also has a closing couplet, again like a sonnet.

Sonnets traditionally present some form of internal argument. The octave, or first eight lines, set up one side of this argument. The closing sestet, or six lines, then reply to this argument, while the couplet at the poem's end offers a resolution to the problem the poem has posed.

In "Harlem Hopscotch," a kind of internal argument does occur as the speaker moves back and forth between the societal rules Black Americans are expected to follow and the untenable, excruciating realities that they are also expected to endure. Like a sonnet, "Harlem Hopscotch" offers its own closing couplet, its own response to this argument, by suggesting that the argument is impossible to resolve on its own terms; that Black Americans can't truly "win" by attempting to follow the rules, but only by refusing to accept the system altogether. Thus while the poem isn't *exactly* a sonnet—it doesn't follow iambic pentameter, nor does it have a clearly defined octave or sestet—it *alludes* to the sonnet in certain ways.

METER

"Harlem Hopscotch" has no set meter. Instead, it feels casual and jazzy throughout.

Despite its lack of consistent meter, the poem does have a clear sense of music and rhythm. For example, the poem sometimes groups together lines that follow an alternating pattern of stressed and unstressed beats, as in the ending of stanza 3:

> Cross the line, they count you out.
> That's what hopping's all about.

This creates a bouncy, steady rhythm that reflects the lines' content: the speaker is talking about the necessity of closely following the rules of the game, so it makes sense that the rhythm here is predictable and relatively rigid.

Along with its patterns of stresses, the poem also creates an interesting tension in the syllabic *length* of its lines. Most of the lines contain seven syllables, an uneven number that introduces a sense of instability and continuing energy in the poem. Contrasting with this are two lines that each contain eight syllables—line 3 ("Another jump … left") and the last line of the poem ("They think … won"). This subtle differentiation in the syllable count of the lines gives the poem rhythm and variation, while also defying resolution until its ending.

These patterns, along with the rhymes at the line endings, contribute to the feel of the poem as a kind of song that children might sing during a game (like hopscotch) at recess. As the poem progresses, this musical element becomes increasingly ironic and painful, highlighting how the conditions the poem describes are all too real. At the same time, the music and rhythms of poem introduce a kind of wit and energy, balancing and carrying the weight the poem describes.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of "Harlem Hopscotch" is simple and straightforward—at least on the surface. Overall, the poem is made up of rhyming couplets. The first three stanzas feature two of these couplets, making these stanzas quatrains, while the final stanza stands alone. As such, the rhyme scheme is

AABB in the first stanza, CCDD in the second, EEFF in the third, and GG in the final couplet.

At first, this steadiness adds to the sense that the poem is a children's song or chant recited during a game (this is especially clear when listening to Angelou herself read the poem, linked in the Resources section of this guide).

But while many of these line endings are full end rhymes, several are not. The BB line endings in the second half of stanza one, "left" and "hisself," are closer to slant rhymes, as are "down" and around" at the start of stanza two. These divergences from the regular rhyme scheme introduce a subtle element of tension into the poem, a sense that all is not as even, predictable, or simple as it first appears. This tension also conveys a fundamental instability and inequality within the world of the poem, in keeping with its subject.

It is perhaps surprising, then, that as the poem progresses and the realities it evokes become increasingly painful and acute, the rhyme scheme actually becomes more regular; the rhymes at the end of stanza 2 and throughout the rest of the poem are full, clear end rhymes. While at a first reading this would appear to create a kind of resolution or closure in the poem, resolving the tension introduced by the slant rhymes earlier on, in fact it has the opposite effect.

In a way, the rhymes, since they are fixed and follow a kind of "rule" of rhyme, could be read as representing the rules of the game, and the societal rules that Black Americans are expected to follow. As the poem goes on and the circumstances described become even more severe and unlivable, the rhyming music of the poem creates a kind of sharp juxtaposition, as the sound of a playful children's rhyme becomes painfully ironic.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Harlem Hopscotch" is unnamed and ungendered. In fact, most of the poem doesn't even contain a first-person "I." What, then, can be known about the speaker?

First, the setting of Harlem suggests that the speaker, like the person the speaker is addressing, is an inhabitant of Harlem. Within the context of the poem, this means that the speaker is likely a Black person living in Harlem, who is addressing a younger person, probably a Black child. The use of colloquial language and the speaker's knowledge of specific realities of life in Harlem reinforce this sense.

The speaker seems, in a sense, to be interpreting the rules of society for the younger addressee, so that the Black child being addressed will know how to navigate and survive in this world. At the same time, because most of the poem is spoken without an "I," the speaker could be read as a more general, even collective speaker who gives voice to all the ways in which Black children are socialized and taught to act and not act in a racist society.

The appearance of the "I" in the last couplet, then, changes the poem. Here, for the first time, it is clear that the speaker is not only giving *directions* for the game; the speaker is also *playing* the game—or *did* play the game, until they made the choice to reject the game and its rules altogether.

This turn at the ending suggests that the speaker is, in a sense, also the poem's addressee; in other words, the speaker at one point was a child who heard and learned these rules. By the poem's ending, though, the speaker has come to a different place and decided to reject the rules, even if that means that other people think that they "lost." The speaker, the poem makes clear, is someone acutely aware of the realities of American racism and the consequences that might follow not abiding by the rules of a racist society, yet they have chosen a different path of freedom and self-realization.

SETTING

The setting of "Harlem Hopscotch" is, as the title suggests, Harlem, a historically Black neighborhood in New York City. During the Great Migration following the Civil War, when millions of Black Americans migrated to the American North, Midwest, and West, many moved to Harlem. The neighborhood became the birthplace of the Harlem Renaissance, an outpouring of Black literature, art and music at the beginning the 20th century. Later, it was home to the Black Arts Movement.

However, the neighborhood has also been known for the conditions of poverty resulting from racism and discrimination that Black inhabitants of the community have been forced to endure since the Great Migration and to the present day. All of these factors are important to the poem, as the speaker explores the meaning of identity, community, and freedom within the context of oppression and unlivable circumstances.

While the title locates the poem specifically in Harlem, it is also possible to read the setting of the poem as what Harlem *represents*. As a historically Black community, "Harlem" can be read as a place, but also as a place that encompasses and represents a crucial part of Black identity and experience in American history. In this sense, many Black Americans who don't live in Harlem might see themselves and their experiences within the poem. The setting, then, is specific but also in a sense metaphorical, since the issues the poem deals with are acutely familiar to many Black Americans and other people of color throughout the United States.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Maya Angelou first recorded "Harlem Hopscotch" as part of a 1969 spoken word collection of her poems, *The Poetry of Maya Angelou*. The poem was then included in her first published collection of poetry in 1971, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie*. Two years before, Angelou had published her first memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the work for which she is perhaps most famous, and which explores her experiences of racism, poverty, and trauma from a perspective of survival and healing.

As a poem, "Harlem Hopscotch" is part of a huge body of literary work; Angelou published numerous collections of poems, plays, memoirs, and children's books during her lifetime, spanning the decades from 1969 to 2013. *The Complete Poetry* was published posthumously in 2015, a year after Angelou's death.

At the time that she wrote "Harlem Hopscotch," Angelou was a member of the Black Arts Movement, a movement of Black art and literature that emerged out of Harlem in the 1960s and 1970s, and that began after the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965. In response to continued experiences of intense oppression, violence, and racism, Black writers and artists including Angelou, Amiri Baraka, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Etheridge Knight sought to foster a Black artistic community free from the dominance of white society. Their work centered Black experiences and articulated visions of justice and social change.

Although the Black Arts Movement began to lose prominence in the mid 1970s, Angelou continued to write and publish until the end of her life. As a poet, memoirist, playwright, and activist, Angelou has had a lasting, indelible impact, not only on American literature but on American society as a whole. In recognition of her life and work, Dr. Angelou was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama in 2010.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There are two aspects of historical context that are important to "Harlem Hopscotch": the historical context of Harlem itself, and the historical context surrounding the poem's publication.

First, it is important to consider the history of the poem's setting. In the years following the Civil War, six million Black Americans migrated from the Jim Crow South to cities in the American North, Midwest, and West to seek a better life. In these cities, however, they faced pervasive racism and discrimination. A combination of legal and extralegal segregation; racist policies at the federal, state, and local levels; and white supremacist violence confined Black Americans to neighborhoods including Harlem, where they endured exploitative landlords, widespread unemployment, and unsafe living conditions. Poverty in communities such as Harlem, then, has its roots in the legacy of slavery and in systemic racism. This connection is important to the poem, as it explores poverty and racism as interlocking realities.

More immediate to the poem's writing and publication, "Harlem Hopscotch" was first recorded in 1969, four years after the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1965. This timing is important. Black Americans had won legal recognition of their Civil Rights, yet the failure to address decades of systemic inequity and discrimination has meant that Black Americans have continued to endure pervasive racism, poverty, and violence. It is these issues that "Harlem Hopscotch" examines, as it envisions a different kind of possibility that can only exist by setting oneself free of the existing system.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Maya Angelou Reading "Harlem Hopscotch" — Listen to Angelou read her poem in her 1969 spoken word collection. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIQHvwtsWQM&list=PLpQuORMLvnZaVpjI37zIrRI
- Biography of Maya Angelou — Read more about Dr. Maya Angelou's life and work, and read more of her poems, at the Poetry Foundation website. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/maya-angelou)
- Maya Angelou's Official Website — Visit the official website of Dr. Maya Angelou to read more about her life, work, and legacy. (https://www.mayaangelou.com)
- Full Album of "Caged Bird Songs" — Listen to the full album "Caged Bird Songs," including the song created for "Harlem Hopscotch," and watch a 2020 video made to accompany Angelou's poem "Human Family." These songs were created for thirteen of Angelou's poems, and include Angelou reading the poems. Maya Angelou collaborated on this album before her death in 2014. (https://cagedbirdsongs.com/#biography)
- Music Video for "Harlem Hopscotch" — Watch a music video created for "Harlem Hopscotch." The video includes Angelou reciting the poem, and choreography Tabitha and Napoleon D'umo (known for their work on the show "So You Think You Can Dance"). This video was included as part of the 2014 album "Caged Bird Songs," a series of songs based on Angelou's poems. (http://www.oprah.com/entertainment/maya-angelous-harlem-hopscotch-official-music-video_1)
- Serena Williams Reading Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" — Listen to tennis legend Serena Williams read Angelou's

famous poem, “Still I Rise,” in this video created by the BBC. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZO08C5vL2A)

- The Black Arts Movement — Learn more about the Black Arts Movement, of which Maya Angelou was a part when she wrote "Harlem Hopscotch." (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/148936/an-introduction-to-the-black-arts-movement)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER MAYA ANGELOU POEMS

- Caged Bird
- Phenomenal Woman
- Still I Rise

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MLA

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