

## James A. Emanuel: On "Mulatto"

This dramatic dialogue offers a tensely individualized conflict between father and son that is hardened by the vigor and scorn of the words and broadened by carefully placed, suggestive details from nature. The son's adamant voice opens the poem, but is transformed into a passive Negro feminine presence exuberantly recalled by the white father, who feels half-pleasurably nagged in his fancied return to the conception and infancy of his son. The poet, employing the past awakened in the white man, leaves him musing and moves the growing child swiftly through years of hostile rejection by his white half-brothers--implying virtual estrangement from his father, whom he no longer reminds of sexual freedom in the Negro quarter. "Niggers ain't my brother" is the rebuff so ungrammatically worded as to show the displacement of reason and truth by blind social restrictions. In the last third of the poem, the father's reminiscences of woods, stars, and exploitable black women are slightly rephrased, indistinctly merging the author's voice with the father's. At the end, "I am your son, white man!" is repeated as a challenging accusation, weaker now, yet taking precedence over the phrases enclosing it, the author-father's echoes of earlier sensuous memories. Oddly, this is the father's poem. The delicious memories, the unweakened sense of arbitrary power to take and to withhold, the expansive portents of nature, even though ironically misconstrued--all are his. The son is the catalyst, but the father glows. The author expands his profoundly racial material and so convincingly explores a white father's subconscious that the poet's own hovering irony becomes inseparable from the ambivalent remembrances of his subject.

From Langston Hughes (Twayne, 1967)

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