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Poetry as Protest: Social Injustice in the Poetry of William Blake and Langston Hughes

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Abstract

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This study explores poetry as a form of protest by examining representations of social injustice in the selected poems of William Blake and Langston Hughes. Drawing on a comparative literary approach, the research analyses how both poets respond to oppression within their distinct historical and cultural contexts. Blake's poetry exposes institutional, religious, and ideological injustices in late eighteenth-century England through symbolic imagery and visionary critique, particularly highlighting the exploitation of children, the poor, and the marginalised. In contrast, Hughes's poetry addresses racial discrimination, economic inequality, and social exclusion in twentieth-century America using a direct and accessible voice rooted in everyday African American experience. The findings reveal that despite differences in style and context, both poets employ poetry as a powerful tool of resistance, challenging dominant ideologies and giving voice to marginalised communities. The study concludes that poetic protest transcends time and place, serving as an enduring medium for social critique and the assertion of human dignity.

Keywords: poetry as protest, social injustice, William Blake, Langston Hughes, comparative analysis

Introduction
Poetry has historically functioned as a powerful medium for social criticism, allowing writers to challenge injustice, expose inequality, and question dominant ideologies. Scholars argue that poetic language has the capacity to compress emotional intensity with political meaning, making it an effective tool for protest across historical periods (Eagleton, 2007; Greenblatt, 2018). Protest poetry often emerges in response to social crises, giving voice to marginalised communities while confronting systems of power that sustain oppression (Abrams, 2015). Within this tradition, poets employ imagery, symbolism, and voice not only to represent suffering but also to provoke ethical awareness and resistance among readers.
William Blake's poetry reflects the social and moral anxieties of late eighteenth-century England, particularly those arising from industrialisation, urban poverty, and institutional authority. Critics note that Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* expose the contrast between idealised moral values and harsh social realities, revealing how the church, state, and economic systems contribute to human suffering (Damrosch, 2019; Frye, 1969). Poems such as *London* and *The Chimney Sweeper* highlight child exploitation, ideological control, and social inequality, presenting a radical critique of the structures that normalise injustice (Makdisi, 2003). Blake's poetry thus functions as a form of moral protest that challenges both visible oppression and internalised forms of control.
In the twentieth-century American context, Langston Hughes emerged as a leading poetic voice against racial injustice and economic inequality. As a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes used poetry to articulate African American identity and to expose the gap between American democratic ideals and lived reality (Rampersad, 2002). Scholars emphasise that Hughes's accessible language and engagement with

everyday experience allow his poetry to confront racism, segregation, and deferred dreams with clarity and urgency (Tracy, 2004; Smethurst, 2011). Through poems such as *I, Too* and *Harlem*, Hughes transforms poetry into an act of resistance, asserting dignity and collective hope in the face of systemic exclusion. Together, Blake and Hughes demonstrate how poetry can transcend time and context to function as a sustained protest against social injustice.

Significance of the Study

This research explores how William Blake and Langston Hughes use poetry to protest social injustice in their respective historical contexts. For Blake, poetry becomes a means of critiquing the social and moral impacts of early industrial society and the oppression of the vulnerable, such as children and the urban poor. His work reveals how economic transformation and institutional power contribute to human suffering and moral decay (e.g., *London*). In contrast, Langston Hughes's poetry reflects the lived experiences of African Americans facing racial discrimination, segregation, and inequality in the United States. His work gives voice to the aspirations and frustrations of Black Americans during the Harlem Renaissance and beyond, drawing attention to systemic racism and the gap between American ideals and lived reality.

By comparing these two poets, this study highlights how poetry functions as a form of social critique across time and cultures. It shows that literary voices can challenge established power structures, promote empathy for marginalised groups, and contribute to broader movements for social change. This comparison also deepens our understanding of protest literature as both artistic expression and political intervention.

Research Objectives

1. To examine how William Blake's selected poems depict social injustice associated with industrialisation and institutional power in late eighteenth-century England.
2. To analyse how Langston Hughes uses poetic form, imagery, and language to represent racial discrimination, social inequality, and the African American struggle for justice.

Research Questions

1. In what ways do William Blake's poems depict social injustice related to industrialisation and institutional power in late eighteenth-century England?

2. How does Langston Hughes use poetic form, imagery, and language to address racial discrimination, inequality, and the African American struggle for justice?

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with William Blake's poetry has consistently emphasised his radical social vision and sustained critique of institutional authority. Blake's works are widely read as responses to the political, economic, and moral crises of late eighteenth-century England, particularly those produced by industrialisation and rigid class structures. Foundational editions of Blake's poetry and prose provide the textual basis for such interpretations, highlighting his persistent concern with human suffering, spiritual oppression, and social inequality (Blake, 1966; Blake, 1991; Blake,

2008). These texts reveal Blake's resistance to systems that normalise poverty, child labour, and ideological control through law and religion.

Biographical and critical studies further situate Blake as a poet deeply engaged with the social realities of his age. Gilchrist's early biographical account foregrounds Blake's marginal position within English society and his resistance to dominant intellectual norms (Gilchrist, 1945). Later critics argue that Blake's lived experience of poverty and political unrest shaped his oppositional stance toward authority (Raine, 1969; Symons, 1907). Bronowski (2012) places Blake within the revolutionary climate of the 1790s, identifying his poetry as a moral response to social upheaval and emerging capitalist exploitation.

Critics have also explored Blake's symbolic method as a vehicle for social protest. Damon's analysis of Blake's symbolic system demonstrates how abstract concepts such as oppression, innocence, and power are embodied in recurring figures and images (Damon, 2013). Makdisi (2007) extends this argument by linking Blake's symbolism to the political contradictions of the 1790s, suggesting that Blake's poetry exposes the violence embedded within modern historical progress. Similarly, Ferber (2014) argues that Blake anticipates Marxist critiques of capitalism by revealing how economic structures distort human relationships and moral values.

A significant body of scholarship focuses on *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* as Blake's most direct engagement with social injustice. Critics highlight poems such as *London*, *The Chimney Sweeper*, and *Holy Thursday* as indictments of institutional hypocrisy and child exploitation (Blake, 1991; Connolly, 2002). These studies emphasise how Blake contrasts innocence with experience to demonstrate how society corrupts natural human goodness. Quinney (2009) further argues that Blake's treatment of the body reflects political resistance, as physical suffering becomes a visible sign of ideological domination.

While Blake's protest is often indirect and visionary, Langston Hughes's poetry is widely recognised for its direct engagement with racial injustice and social inequality in twentieth-century America. Hughes's collected works and biographies establish him as a central voice of the Harlem Renaissance, committed to representing African American life with honesty and political urgency (Hughes & Hubbard, 2001; Rampersad, 2001). His poetry confronts segregation, economic marginalisation, and cultural exclusion, often through accessible language that foregrounds lived experience.

Critical studies of Hughes emphasise his role in redefining American identity from the perspective of marginalised people. Hughes's essay *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* articulates a clear rejection of assimilationist ideals and affirms Black cultural expression as a form of resistance (Hughes, 1985). Scholars argue that this manifesto informs much of his poetry, where everyday speech, blues rhythms, and personal assertion become tools of protest (Tracy, 2001; Miller, 1989). Poems such as *I, Too* and *Let America Be America Again* have been read as direct challenges to national myths of equality and freedom (Hughes, 1990; Hughes, 2020).

Biographical criticism further links Hughes's political commitments to his poetic form. Rampersad (2001) demonstrates how Hughes's engagement with labour movements, racial politics, and global struggles against oppression shaped his literary voice. Kutzinski (2012) situates Hughes within a transnational context, arguing that his work reflects diasporic consciousness and resistance to imperial power. These perspectives highlight how Hughes's poetry operates not only as artistic expression but also as

cultural intervention.

Comparative scholarship on Blake and Hughes remains relatively limited, despite thematic overlaps in their treatment of injustice. Existing studies tend to focus on each poet in isolation, emphasising either Blake's prophetic symbolism or Hughes's racial realism. Few works place them in dialogue to examine how poetry functions as protest across different historical moments and sociopolitical systems. This study addresses that gap by comparing Blake's critique of institutional and ideological oppression with Hughes's confrontation of racial and economic injustice, demonstrating how poetic protest adapts to context while retaining its ethical force.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and comparative research methodology to examine poetry as a form of protest against social injustice in the works of William Blake and Langston Hughes. The research is text-based and interpretive, focusing on close reading and thematic analysis of selected poems. Qualitative literary analysis is suitable for this study because it allows an in-depth examination of language, imagery, symbolism, and thematic concerns related to oppression, inequality, and resistance.

Selected Poems

William Blake (18th-century England)

1. *London*

This poem exposes the suffering caused by industrialisation and urban poverty. Blake critiques political authority, economic exploitation, and the failure of social institutions to protect the vulnerable.

2. *The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Experience)*

Blake highlights child labour and social neglect, revealing how religious and social systems justify exploitation while silencing the oppressed.

3. *Holy Thursday (Songs of Experience)*

This poem condemns institutional hypocrisy by questioning how a society that celebrates religious charity can tolerate widespread poverty and suffering.

4. *The Little Black Boy (Songs of Innocence)*

Blake addresses racial inequality and spiritual marginalisation, using innocence to challenge ideas of racial hierarchy and moral exclusion.

Langston Hughes (20th-century United States)

1. *I, Too*

Hughes asserts African American identity and belonging, directly confronting racial segregation and exclusion from the American social order.

2. *Harlem (A Dream Deferred)*

This poem explores the psychological and social consequences of postponed justice and unrealised dreams caused by systemic racism.

3. *Let America Be America Again*

Hughes critiques the contradiction between America's democratic ideals and the lived realities of marginalised communities.

4. *Theme for English B*

The poem examines identity, race, and inequality in an educational setting, highlighting subtle forms of racial division and shared humanity.

Method of Analysis

The poems are analysed through close textual reading, focusing on themes of social injustice, protest, resistance, and marginalisation. Key poetic elements such as diction, imagery, symbolism, tone, and voice are examined to understand how each poet articulates protest. A comparative approach is employed to identify similarities and differences in how Blake and Hughes respond to injustice within their distinct historical and cultural contexts. This method allows the study to trace how poetry functions as a tool of social critique across time, geography, and social structures.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Marxist literary criticism and Postcolonial theory, with additional support from cultural materialism, to examine poetry as a mode of social protest. Marxist literary theory provides the primary framework for analysing William Blake's poetry, as it foregrounds issues of class struggle, economic exploitation, and the ideological role of institutions in sustaining inequality (Marx & Engels, 1848; Eagleton, 1976). Through a Marxist lens, Blake's representations of child labour, urban poverty, and institutional authority are examined to reveal how economic power and dominant ideology shape social injustice and normalise human suffering (Williams, 1977; Tyson, 2006).

Postcolonial theory forms the core framework for the analysis of Langston Hughes's poetry. This theoretical perspective focuses on racial oppression, marginalisation, identity formation, and resistance within systems shaped by colonial and postcolonial power relations (Said, 1978; Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002). Hughes's poetry is interpreted as a response to racial hierarchy and cultural exclusion in American society, illustrating how poetic language becomes a means of asserting African American identity and challenging dominant national narratives (Fanon, 1967; Bhabha, 1994).

Cultural materialism supports both theoretical approaches by situating literary texts within their historical, social, and ideological contexts. It emphasises the relationship between literature and material conditions, viewing texts as products of specific power structures rather than isolated artistic expressions (Williams, 2020; Dollimore & Sinfield, 1985). By integrating Marxist criticism, Postcolonial theory, and cultural materialism, this study demonstrates how Blake and Hughes employ poetry as a form of protest that exposes social injustice and interrogates dominant systems of power across different historical and cultural settings.

Analysis of William Blake's Selected Poems in Relation to Social Injustice

William Blake's poetry consistently exposes the social, economic, and moral injustices of late eighteenth-century England. Through symbolic imagery, sharp contrasts, and an accusatory tone, Blake transforms poetry into a powerful medium of protest. His selected poems reveal how oppression is sustained through institutions such as the state, the church, and socially imposed ideologies, with devastating effects on children, the poor, and racially marginalised individuals.

1. *London*

In *London*, Blake presents the city as a space of systematic suffering and institutional control, beginning with the speaker's movement through "each chartered street" and along the "chartered Thames," which suggests that even public and natural spaces are

owned, regulated, and restricted by political and economic power. This repeated use of "chartered" reflects how authority limits human freedom through legal and economic mechanisms. Blake observes "marks of weakness, marks of woe" on every face he encounters, emphasising that suffering is not isolated but widespread and deeply embedded in social life.

The poet intensifies this sense of collective misery by referring to "every cry of every Man" and "every Infant's cry of fear," highlighting how injustice affects all classes while particularly victimising children. Blake's critique moves beyond physical oppression to ideological control through the metaphor of "mind-forged manacles," which suggests that individuals internalise the values and beliefs that enslave them. Institutional failure is further exposed when Blake condemns the "blackening Church," portraying religion as morally corrupted and complicit in social suffering. The image of blood running down "Palace walls" finally implicates political authority in violence and exploitation, turning *London* into a forceful protest against industrial capitalism, authoritarian governance, and moral hypocrisy.

2. *The Chimney Sweeper* (*Songs of Experience*)

In *The Chimney Sweeper* from *Songs of Experience*, Blake directly addresses child exploitation by presenting a child speaker who describes himself as "a little black thing among the snow," an image that highlights both physical suffering and social abandonment. The child's repeated cry of "weep! weep! in notes of woe" reflects emotional despair while also echoing the mechanical rhythm of labour imposed on children. Blake exposes parental neglect when the speaker explains that his parents "are gone up to the church to pray," revealing the irony of religious devotion coexisting with moral irresponsibility.

The child bitterly notes that his parents believe "they have done me no injury," exposing how suffering is normalised and justified through social and religious ideology. Blake explicitly condemns institutional power when the speaker accuses "God and his Priest and King," identifying religion and monarchy as forces that legitimise oppression. The line "who make up a heaven of our misery" powerfully exposes how institutions construct moral narratives that transform suffering into virtue. Through this poem, Blake protests the exploitation of children and reveals how faith and authority are used to silence resistance and sustain injustice.

3. *Holy Thursday* (*Songs of Experience*)

In *Holy Thursday*, Blake challenges the illusion of charity and moral righteousness in English society by opening with the provocative question, "Is this a holy thing to see," immediately questioning the ethics of religious celebration amid widespread poverty. He exposes the contradiction of a nation described as a "rich and fruitful land" while simultaneously reducing its children to "babes reduced to misery." This contrast reveals how material wealth coexists with moral failure.

Blake deepens his critique through bleak environmental imagery, describing a world where "the sun does never shine" and where "the fields are bleak and bare," symbolising the absence of compassion and justice. The children's lives are portrayed as paths where "their ways are filled with thorns," suggesting constant suffering and hardship. The declaration that "it is eternal winter there" reinforces the idea that deprivation is not temporary but structurally ingrained. Through these images, Blake protests institutional hypocrisy and argues that charity without justice is meaningless

in a society that tolerates systemic poverty.

4. *The Little Black Boy*

Although often read as a poem of spiritual innocence, *The Little Black Boy* also engages deeply with racial injustice and ideological conditioning. The speaker introduces himself by stating that his mother bore him "in the southern wild," immediately marking racial and geographical difference. When the child claims, "black, but O! my soul is white," Blake reveals how racial hierarchy has been internalised, equating whiteness with purity and worth.

Blake uses the metaphor of "these black bodies and this sunburnt face" as a "cloud" that obscures the soul, suggesting that racial difference is socially constructed rather than spiritually meaningful. The child explains that human beings are "put on earth for a little space," emphasising the temporary nature of physical identity. In a subtle reversal of hierarchy, the speaker imagines that he will "shade him from the heat," positioning himself as protector rather than inferior. The vision of both children rejoicing "round the tent of God like lambs" ultimately affirms spiritual equality. Through this gentle yet profound imagery, Blake exposes how racial ideology shapes self-perception while quietly protesting the injustice embedded in social beliefs.

Table 1

Social Injustice in William Blake's Selected Poems

Poem	Type of Injustice	Key Analytical Insight
London	Institutional oppression	**Reveals state and ideological control through images of "charter'd" spaces and "mind-forg'd manacles," exposing systemic suffering.**
***The Chimney Sweeper* (*Experience*)**	Child exploitation	**Critiques religious and parental hypocrisy as children are "clothed… in the clothes of death" while authority praises God.**
***Holy Thursday* (*Experience*)**	Poverty and false charity	**Challenges Christian morality by portraying England as a "sunless" land where children live in misery.**
The Little Black Boy	Racial marginalization	**Subtly protests racial hierarchy by affirming spiritual equality beyond physical difference.**

Analysis of Langston Hughes's Selected Poems in Relation to Social Injustice

Langston Hughes employs poetry as a clear and accessible instrument of protest against racial discrimination, economic inequality, and social exclusion in twentieth-century America. His language is direct and conversational, allowing lived Black experience to speak for itself. Across the selected poems, Hughes exposes systemic injustice, dismantles national myths, and asserts marginalised identity as a form of resistance.

1. *I, Too*

In *I, Too,* Hughes transforms personal assertion into a powerful protest against racial segregation. The speaker's declaration, "I, too, sing America," immediately challenges exclusionary definitions of national identity by insisting on Black presence within the American narrative. Social injustice is symbolised when the speaker recalls, "They send me to eat in the kitchen," a line that reflects enforced racial separation and social invisibility. By identifying himself as the "darker brother," Hughes foregrounds racial identity while asserting familial belonging within the nation. The injustice of segregation is countered by quiet confidence when the speaker predicts, "Tomorrow, I'll be at the table," envisioning a future where exclusion no longer holds power. Hughes further destabilises racial hierarchy by suggesting that others will "see how beautiful I am," redefining Black identity beyond racist perception. The poem culminates in moral accountability when the speaker declares that others will "be ashamed," transforming dignity and patience into tools of protest against systemic racism.

2. *Harlem (A Dream Deferred)*

In *Harlem,* Hughes examines social injustice through the psychological consequences of delayed equality. The poem opens with the central question, "What happens to a dream deferred?" framing injustice as an unresolved and dangerous condition. Racial oppression is explored metaphorically when Hughes asks whether the dream "dries up like a raisin in the sun," suggesting emotional exhaustion and loss of vitality. The image of a dream that "festers like a sore" presents injustice as a painful wound ignored by society, while the comparison to "rotten meat" implies moral decay caused by prolonged neglect. Hughes also considers emotional suppression when he asks if the dream "crusts and sugars over like a syrupy sweet," implying artificial sweetness masking deep suffering. The poem's final question, "Or does it explode?" warns that systemic injustice, if continuously deferred, may lead to collective unrest, making protest an inevitable outcome of ignored inequality.

3. *Let America Be America Again*

This poem serves as Hughes's most explicit critique of structural injustice and national hypocrisy. Hughes challenges idealised patriotism by invoking the promise of America as "the land that never has been yet," exposing the gap between ideology and lived reality. Social injustice is articulated through marginalised voices when the speaker identifies himself as "the poor white, fooled and pushed apart," alongside "the Negro bearing slavery's scars." Hughes expands the scope of injustice by including immigrants and labourers who are "caught in that ancient endless chain of profit, power, gain." The repeated insistence, "America never was America to me," dismantles the myth of equal opportunity. Yet the poem resists despair by asserting collective agency in the call to "make America again," reframing protest as reclamation rather than rejection. By demanding an America that belongs to "me, who made America," Hughes positions marginalised communities as rightful architects of national identity.

4. *Theme for English B*

In *Theme for English B,* Hughes explores subtle yet pervasive forms of racial injustice within educational and social institutions. The speaker's awareness of difference

emerges when he notes that he is "the only colored student in my class," highlighting isolation within a supposedly neutral academic space. Social division is reinforced by physical separation, as the speaker must travel from the university on the hill down to Harlem, where he lives. Hughes questions racial assumptions when the speaker reflects, "I guess you learn from me," challenging the one-directional flow of knowledge in white-dominated spaces. Identity is complicated through the assertion, "I like a pipe for a Christmas present," blending personal taste with shared American culture to resist racial stereotyping. The speaker's recognition that "being coloured doesn't make me not like the same things other folks like" confronts ideological boundaries. The poem concludes with mutual responsibility when the speaker states, "You are white yet a part of me, as I am a part of you," transforming everyday experience into a quiet but firm protest against racial separation.

Table 2
Social Injustice in Langston Hughes's Selected Poems

Poem	Type of Injustice	Key Analytical Insight
I, Too	Racial segregation	**Asserts Black belonging in America by challenging exclusion from social and national identity.**
Harlem	Deferred racial justice	**Reveals the psychological and social damage caused by denied dreams and delayed equality.**
Let America Be America Again	Structural and economic inequality	**Exposes the gap between American ideals and the lived reality of marginalised groups.**
Theme for English B	Everyday racial exclusion	**Highlights subtle racial inequality within educational spaces while affirming shared humanity.**

Findings

The comparative analysis of William Blake and Langston Hughes reveals that although both poets employ poetry as a form of protest against social injustice, their methods, contexts, and rhetorical strategies differ significantly. Blake's protest is rooted in late eighteenth-century England and is largely symbolic and visionary. He exposes injustice through dense imagery, irony, and allegory, critiquing institutions such as the Church, the State, and capitalist structures that perpetuate poverty, child exploitation, and ideological control. His poems reveal how oppression operates subtly through laws, religion, and internalised beliefs, making injustice appear natural and inevitable.

In contrast, Langston Hughes writes from the lived reality of twentieth-century African American experience and adopts a direct, accessible, and conversational style. His poetry confronts racial segregation, economic inequality, and exclusion from national identity with clarity and emotional immediacy. While Blake often universalises suffering to expose systemic corruption, Hughes personalises injustice, allowing marginalised voices to speak for themselves. Both poets challenge dominant ideologies, yet Blake imagines liberation through moral awakening and spiritual vision, whereas Hughes emphasises assertion, collective agency, and future-oriented

resistance. Together, their works demonstrate that poetry across historical and cultural contexts functions as a powerful medium for social critique and protest.

Table 3

Comparative Findings: Social Injustice in William Blake and Langston Hughes

Aspect	William Blake	Langston Hughes
Historical context	Industrial England	**Segregated America**
Form of protest	Symbolic and visionary critique	**Direct and conversational assertion**
Focus of injustice	Institutional, religious, and ideological oppression	**Racial, economic, and social exclusion**
Representation of the oppressed	Children, poor, racially marginalised	**African Americans and marginalised workers**
Tone	Accusatory and prophetic	**Assertive, reflective, and hopeful**
Vision of change	Moral and spiritual awakening	**Collective resistance and future inclusion**

Conclusion

This study examined how William Blake and Langston Hughes employ poetry as a form of protest to expose social injustice within their respective historical and cultural contexts. The analysis demonstrated that Blake critiques late eighteenth-century English society by revealing how institutions such as the Church, the State, and economic systems perpetuate oppression, particularly against children, the poor, and the marginalised. Through symbolic imagery and visionary language, Blake presents injustice as both an external structure and an internalised condition, urging moral awareness and spiritual resistance. His poetry exposes the hypocrisy of social authority and challenges readers to recognise the hidden mechanisms through which injustice is sustained.

In contrast, Langston Hughes confronts twentieth-century American injustice through a direct and accessible poetic voice rooted in lived experience. His poems foreground racial discrimination, economic inequality, and exclusion from national identity, transforming personal assertion into collective protest. Hughes reclaims marginalised voices and redefines patriotism as inclusion and accountability rather than idealised nationalism. The comparative findings reveal that while Blake relies on symbolism and moral critique, and Hughes on clarity and self-assertion, both poets affirm poetry's enduring power as a medium of resistance. Their works collectively demonstrate that poetic protest not only exposes injustice but also imagines possibilities for dignity, equality, and social transformation across time and culture.

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