



# A Distant Reading Experiment: Interpreting the Poetic Voice on Hughes's Poems (1921–1967)

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**Abstract.** Previously, reading Hughes's poems predominantly relied on close reading approach and it combined with either narrow-shallow or narrow-deep approaches. This study aims to read Hughes's poetic voices on 868 poems (1921-1967) through a combined distant–narrow–deep reading approach, integrating computational analysis and qualitative interpretation. The research employs a mixed-method. Data were processed using Python 3.13 with ChatGPT-assisted algorithm coding, and Voyant Tools to generate word and n-gram frequencies along with their contextual appearances. The findings reveal two main forms, which are elaborated into three sub-discussions. First, three dominant lexical items are identified across Hughes's poems: “the”, “and”, and “I”. The function of “the”, phonetically parallel separation to “de”, not only reinforces definite meaning but also asserts Hughes's identity within the Afro-American diasporic. The correlation conjunction “and” serves to create a musical–rhetorical effect, while “I” does not merely highlight Hughes's lyrical style but represents an “I” transindividual. Second, in relation to this lyrical style, patterns of repetition display rhythmic structures resembling jazz and blues, indicating the interconnection between poetic form and musicality. Finally, based on the frequency of dominant words found through Voyant Tools, three distinctive lexical items emerge such as “like”, “black”, and “white”, which demonstrate the dominance of simile and racial symbolism grounded in social and historical discourse. Therefore, this experimental reading model enables both the analysis and interpretation of the poetic voice unique to a specific poet, both the surface-level poetic structures but also their internal frameworks that sustain the poetics.

**Keywords:** Distant Reading, Jazz Poetry, Langston Hughes, Poetic Voice.

## 1 Introduction

Previous literary studies were closely linked to the interpretation of texts through close reading [1], [2]. However, the shift of the humanities studies into the digital space has transformed our reading perspective on literature, including art. One of the major transformations concerns how literature is read, most notably through an approach known as distant reading, an approach pioneered by Franco Moretti [2], [3], [4].

According to Moretti, distant reading is an approach mediated by computational machine to analyse either the smallest or largest textual units, such as literary devices, genres, systems, themes, or stylistic features [5]. These units enable texts to be treated as quantifiable data, including aspects such as word frequency, thematic distribution, or emotional fluctuation [4]. This approach makes it possible to examine massive literary corpora, which would otherwise be unmanageable through conventional close reading. Zajc, for instance, demonstrates how aesthetic patterns vary according to creative periods and textual genres within large literary corpora [6]. These tasks would be extremely difficult to accomplish using close reading alone, especially when identifying the aesthetic tendencies of individual authors or poets within specific periods. Even the process of identifying the aesthetic patterns of a single poet across their entire body of work requires considerable time and often appears subjective when employing the close reading approach. Referring to Suryajaya formulation of literary reading, such an examination can instead be conducted through a combination of three approaches, namely distant-narrow-deep reading [7].

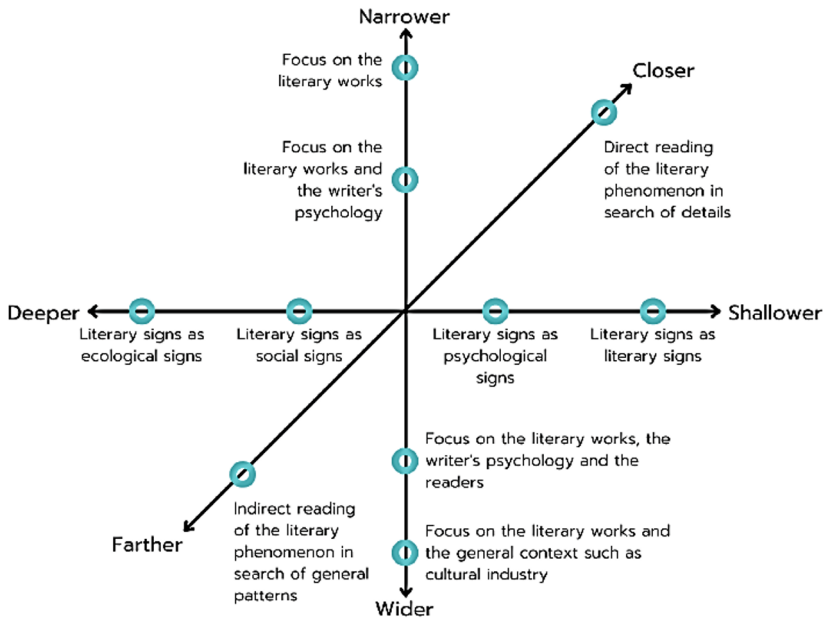


Fig. 1. The axis of reading by Suryajaya

When viewed through the vector lines of the X, Y, and Z axes (Figure 1), the close–narrow–shallow reading model is positioned along the positive axes of X, Y, and Z. However, some scholars also employ a combination of close–narrow–deep reading. The examination of Langston Hughes’s distinctive poetic voice, for instance, reflects such an approach. His poem possesses a unique tone that is both ironic and grounded in the voice of the common people (folks), which has led some critics to regard his work as ordinary or unrefined in its expression [8].

Hughes's poem has also been identified as a communicative medium addressing issues of racism, racial pride, and discrimination in relation to white society, which has led to his recognition as a black mass poet of Afro-American identity [9], [10], [11], [12]. These assumptions are grounded in Hughes's essay "*My Adventures as a Social Poet*", which serves as his acknowledgement of the collective experience of racism that shaped his poetic expression [13]. Some scholars have also characterised his poetic voice as constructive, radical, multiracial, resistant, and emancipatory, particularly after the 1930s [14], [15], [16]. Finally, Skansgaard claims that *The Weary Blues* (1923) does not construct its persona through racial symbolism but rather through historical narration [17]. All of these readings interpret Hughes's work through the interrelation between intrinsic and extrinsic structures.

On the other hand, some scholars have positioned their reading of Hughes's poems by combining the close-narrow-shallow approaches to identify his distinctive characteristics. Huang justifies Hughes's poems as *jazz poetry* because it adapts and manipulates structural techniques derived from the blues form [18]. Consequently, others have identified it as *blues poetry* by examining the AAB rhyme pattern, which contains elements of line repetition and response response [19]. This pattern is evident in several of his poems. *The Weary Blues* (1923), for instance, in its first stanza, consists of six lines with an AABCCB rhyme scheme and an iambic hexameter rhythm and metre pattern.

When we revisited through Figure 1, all the aforementioned readings remain within the close and narrow approaches, yet they shift along the X-axis between the negative (deeper) and the positive (shallower) directions. In Abrams concepts, such critical readings lie between the objective and the mimetic approaches [20]. However, does this mean that the readings discussed in the previous studies are flawed? Zen Hae responds to this question by asserting that "there is no good or bad literary work" as long as it contains political content [21]. However, this argument is problematic, since Zen Hae directly negates his own initial statement. Nevertheless, for the present researcher, these readings are not inherently problematic as long as they do not conflate objectivity with interpretative bias.

In this regard, this article seeks to conduct a distant-narrow-deep reading as an experimental approach to the poetic voice in Hughes's poems written between 1921 and 1967, as compiled in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1995), edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel [8]. This mode of reading is chosen because the researcher focuses primarily on the intrinsic elements of the work, which are considered as its poetics, while only slightly relating them to extrinsic aspects such as the poet's social context and personal expression. This approach is taken on the assumption that Hughes's poems are deeply emotional and closely tied to his personal and social experiences.

Poetic voice, in this context, refers to the exploration of the form of the work (*in presentia*) and the structural discourse that underlies it (*in absentia*) [22]. Following too Jakobson, the integration of both does not merely centre on the poetic function visible on the surface but also examines its relationship with other language functions (discourse) crystallised within the poetic function [23]. Consequently, this study not

only observes the syntagmatic axis but also the paradigmatic one, which is intricately connected to the external structures embodied within the text.

## 2 Method

This study employs a mixed-methods. The sources of data are divided into two categories: primary and secondary. The primary source is 868 poems in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes (TCPLH)* (1995), edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel [8]. The secondary sources include Hughes's collection of essays, as well as relevant articles, books, and other references. This study is considered a mixed-methods design because the textual data are not only examined quantitatively, as numerical values, but also qualitatively, through the contextual meanings of words, phrases, and sentences. In other words, through computational algorithmic operations, the data are processed and presented in to numerical and textual form [5].

The data from the primary source were obtained through the distant reading technique. In general, this technique is conducted in three stages: data input (book), algorithmic processing, and output or machine-generated reading results. During the data input stage, the researcher edited TCPLH by removing the cover, contents, introduction, and biography page, leaving only the purified corpus of poems. This corpus was then uploaded to Google Drive, making it ready to be processed and retrieved by the algorithmic Python system.

In the data processing stage, the researcher employed three tools: ChatGPT, Python 3.13, and Voyant Tools.

- ChatGPT functioned as a research assistant to help generate several algorithmic codings, such as those for processing word frequencies and n-gram magnitudes, along with their respective visual outputs.
- Python 3.13 was employed following the generation of algorithmic codes via ChatGPT. However, the researcher modified several elements of the code, such as tokenisation, stopword removal, and target word specification. Operationally, tokenisation refers to a method of symbol identification used by the machine to recognise words as units of analysis while excluding other symbols such as periods, commas, semicolons, and so forth. In this python processing, stopword removal was not applied in determining word frequency, in order to preserve the authenticity of the poet's voice [24]. Meanwhile, the target words functioned to specify the number of words the algorithm should display, which in this case, was set at 100 words. Meanwhile the n-gram magnitude, its determination was made after the word frequencies were generated, by embedding words categorised as lexical or representative of poetic style. In this context, n-gram refers to a sequence of words treated as a single analytical unit—ranging from bigrams (two words), trigrams (three words), fourgrams (four words), up to sixgrams (six words)—both preceding and following a given word. The primary objective of this operational system was to uncover the contextual meaning of words within their sentence structures.
- Meanwhile, Voyant Tools served to analyse textual data either automatically or semi-automatically, extracting linguistic information from the text into visual

formats (i.e., cirrus data, tables of context, and trend diagrams) [25], [26]. In other words, this tool provides data visualisation by highlighting all words—from the most prominent to the least frequent—while displaying each word’s contextual occurrence. It can even compare two authors through their literary works [27]. In this processing context, Voyant Tools was employed specifically to extract word data into cirrus data, word relations, and context tables for each lexical item.

In relation to the two points above, the final output generated through the machine reading process consisted of word frequency (without stopword removal), n-grams, and several forms of visualisation, including tables showing the relationship between preceding and succeeding words, cirrus data visualisations of poetic elements, trend diagrams of poetic style usage, word relations, and tables of context.

In this study, the researcher occupies as the second-order reader, functioning as an interpreter of the data presented by the machine, which in turn acts as the first-order reader. In basically, the data retrieval process described above constitutes both a reading and an analytical activity conducted by the machine upon qualitative data, translated into quantification through computational algorithms [24], [28]. The resulting output takes two forms: qualitative data (tables of word and phrase contexts) and quantitative data (numerical values). In relation to the processes of machine reading and analysis, the researcher’s role lies in selecting the lexical as the poetic represented through words and phrases, which are then processed as n-grams.

In analytically procedure, this study employs a sequential explanatory model that begins with quantitative analysis and proceeds to the interpretation of qualitative data generated by the machine. The researcher first interprets the quantitative data by examining the frequency results displayed in table of words or trend diagrams and explaining them descriptively and argumentatively. The process then continues with the embedding of data that reflect the emergence of poetic voice through the use of words in the poems, which are processed into n-grams and analysed in relation to their preceding (trigram to sixthgram) and succeeding (bigram to sixthgram) phrases. The resulting data are interpreted through the conceptual framework of poetic style (stylistics) and the extrinsic context of the works. Finally, the aesthetic patterns that characterise the poet’s distinctive voice are identified, leading to the formulation of the study’s conclusions.

### **3 Results and Discussion**

#### **3.1 When the Voices of “the,” “and,” and “I” Dominate Hughes’s Poems**

When Covid-19 swept across Indonesia in 2021, Artdonwforum and Rururadio held a virtual discussion on the Festival Puisi Jelek. The chosen theme was quite intriguing: “Puisi kok, gitu? Tipis-tipis #festivalpuisijelek”. During the discussion, participants collectively questioned the very definition of poetry and its relationship to poetic voice. One particularly interesting definition—almost unanimously agreed upon—was that “poetry is play, without definition, and entirely experimental.” This statement, in essence, is metadefinitive: it defines poetry through the act of defining it. The diction

of “play” affirms that poetry is fundamentally an act of playfulness. When this conclusion was drawn, the researcher was reminded of Schiller’s (2020) conception of human existence and art. For Schiller, the play instinct within human beings serves as an impulse to create beauty. Moreover, this instinctive drive in art gives rise to a sense of freedom unbound by the material world. Consequently, art (i.e., poetry and other literary works) can generate multiple definitions through its experimental forms. Because of this nature, poetry becomes a space of encounter between souls, its language (which may be seen as a form of language play) transcends language itself [30]. In this sense, language constitutes the material structure of poetry. Therefore, each poet can define poetry through their own formal experimentation—including its structure and other compositional aspects.

Langston Hughes’s poems, of course, possess distinctive characteristics, as previously assumed. When the researcher conducted a distant reading of his poems using Python, several words prominently surfaced. The most frequent were “the,” appearing 4.513 times; “and,” appearing 2.456 times; and “I,” appearing 2.242 times. These three words stand at the peak of the word frequency hierarchy (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Top 100 words frequency on Hughes’s poems

No	Words	Freq	Words	Freq	Words	Freq	Words	Freq
1	The	4513	like	367	up	243	back	166
2	And	2456	so	365	down	239	de	165
3	I	2242	when	362	or	239	o	164
4	A	2223	was	348	if	224	just	161
5	To	1857	they	333	said	219	dream	158
6	Of	1651	At	318	m	217	freedom	157
7	In	1514	From	316	an	216	had	155
8	You	1390	are	309	old	213	their	154
9	S	1026	there	300	one	211	long	150
10	That	834	what	296	too	207	song	149
11	Is	780	As	293	ain	206	here	149
12	T	776	who	292	know	203	dark	146
13	Me	735	We	283	by	201	never	146
14	My	690	man	282	now	200	way	144
15	For	665	This	276	night	199	let	144
16	It	625	black	275	she	196	ll	143
17	On	622	Out	274	her	189	time	141
18	But	554	can	267	got	189	See	140
19	with	479	white	266	love	188	good	140
20	Be	457	don	264	little	180	our	137
21	No	443	his	261	go	171	get	132
22	your	436	will	256	world	170	then	131
23	All	435	have	245	come	170	would	126
24	not	394	do	244	day	169	some	126
25	He	374	where	244	say	169	harlem	126

Source: *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1995) by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel

Before delving further into the reasons why the article “the,” the conjunction “and,” and the subject “I” appear as the most dominant words, it is necessary to clarify several letters that are read as individual words in the table above. Some letters such as “s,” “t,” “m,” “ll,” and “o” are in fact word units shortened into single letters by the algorithmic system. The letter “s,” when accompanied by an apostrophe, indicates possession, as in “negro’s,” “sun’s,” “Jim Crow Y.M.A.C’s,” “three 7’s,” “bridge’s,” and so forth. Meanwhile, “t” and “ll,” also followed by apostrophes, function as contractions: “t” appears in words like “don’t,” “ain’t,” and “can’t,” while “ll” occurs in “I’ll,” “you’ll,” “blues’ll,” “child’ll,” and similar forms. In short, these letters cannot be excluded from the analysis, as they contribute significantly to the sound of poetry. For instance, the diction “child’ll” in *Lament over Love* (1927) illustrates this auditory quality vividly.

I hope my child’ll  
 Never love a man.  
 I say I hope my child’ll  
 Never love a man.

The sound of “child’ll” at the end of the first and third lines does more than create rhythmic and rhyming effects; it also evokes the sense of a moving image. Similarly, other instances of such contractions contribute not only to the rhyme within a stanza but also to the poem’s overall musical texture. For this reason, the researcher chose not to exclude them from the analysis, as they remain closely connected to the discussion that follows.

### The Function of “the” in Hughes’s Poems

As previously mentioned, the use of “the” in Hughes’s poems represents the highest point of dominance among the top 100 word frequencies (Table 1). However, before delving further into the article “the,” it is worth comparing its sonic presence with that of “and” and “I,” which also occupy dominant positions in Hughes’s poems.

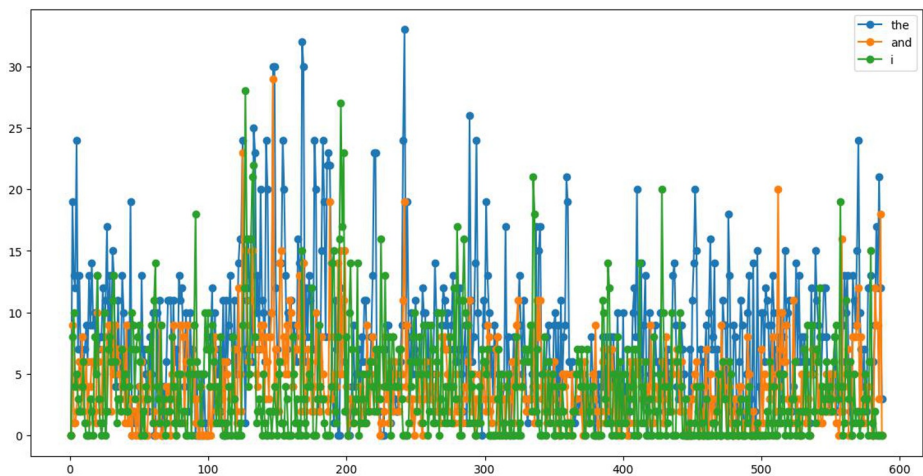


Fig. 2. The trend of the three most frequently occurring word sounds per page



The rose still grows beside my door,  
But you have gone

The sky is blue and the robin sings;  
The butterflies dance on rainbow wings  
Though I am sad.

In all the earth no joy can be;  
Happiness comes no more to me,  
For you are dead.

When examining the poem above, we find ten occurrences of the article “the”, all of which are used in definite and specific contexts. In the first stanza, for instance, *The moon* refers to “still sends its mellow light”, making it both definite and specific. Likewise, in the following lines, “the purple”, strengthened by the adjective “darkness”, and “the night” as an adverbial phrase, further confirm the function of “the” as a marker of definiteness and specificity. This contextual pattern is consistent throughout Hughes’s poems. Thus, the researcher dares to justify that some of Hughes’s poems still adhere to strict English grammatical conventions. Moreover, within the context of figurative language, the article “the” functions as an emphatic element that constructs the intended mental imagery and is assumed to contribute to the integrity of metaphor, personification, symbolisation, and simile.

Then, what about the use of “de” in his poems? Based on computational reading across all titles, there are 50 that contain the article “de” 868 his poems see [8, pp. 44–250]. There are three key points to underline regarding the use of “de” in Hughes’s poems. First, similar to the use of the article “the” in some of the 50 identified poems (see Figure 4).



In the poem, we encounter sound imagery through the use of alliteration of “m” in “me”, “ma”, and “mo”, as well as “d” in “do”, “de”, and “da, which remains consistent in both the first and last stanzas. This auditory pattern is not merely established through a mental structure of signifiers but also sustained through their physical form. Thus, the function of “de” produces a rhythmic sound effect and structural consistency within the stanzas. Furthermore, historically, de Charleston refers to an African ritual dance that became popular in America during the 1920s and was once ridiculed by white communities in England, France, and America—even condemned by the Archbishop of Eastern Poland as a sinful dance, labelled the dance of death [33], [34]. This clearly represents an effort to sublimate African cultural reality into his poem.

Thirdly, and slightly connected to the above context, Hughes sometimes employs the article “de” to assert his poetic identity within the Afro-American diasporic. The word “de” is not an English prefix but an African lexic form with a similar articulatory function. The majority of its appearances occur in Hughes’s poems written between 1920 and 1950. During these years, Hughes consistently celebrated Afro-American cultural richness across regions, classes, and genders [8]. His works were also recognised for carrying race pride [9]. This aligns with Hughes’s statement in his essay “*The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*” [35], where he affirms that “most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment.”

Therefore, the functions of “the” not only serves as an article to mark definiteness and specificity but also functions to construct imagery through varied forms. Meanwhile, the use of “de” shares part of the same grammatical role yet goes further in affirming Hughes’s identity within the Afro-American diasporic context.

### **The Function of “and” in Hughes’s Poems**

Nowdays, regarding the word “and” as previously mentioned. The conjunction “and” in Hughes’s poems appears in 2.456 contexts, with 1.298 instances positioned at the beginning of a line. Across all these contexts, “and” serves two main functions: first, as a bridge that correlates two ideas; and second, as a musical device through the rhetorical style of repetition.

Firstly, in formal grammatical terms, “and” functions to correlate two ideas. In English grammar, this is referred to as a correlative conjunction. For instance, in the poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* (1921), there are four occurrences of the conjunction “and”—in the second, sixth, seventh, and ninth lines. The “and” as a correlative conjunction aims to connect two images. The image, or *signifier* in this context, relates to an idea or *signified*, which represents the mental force that generates meaning in the reader’s mind see [36].

For example, in the second and third lines of *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*: “I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than / the flow of human blood in human veins”, there are two images intertwined “rivers ancient as the world”, which conceptualises the image of “the world” as having an equivalence to “rivers ancient”, thus concretising the notion of the *ancient world*. The poet then adds the conjunction “and” to correlate it with the subsequent image “older than the flow of human blood in human veins”, suggesting that the flow of human blood is older than the flow within ancient rivers. Interpreted literally, Hughes seems to express that human existence precedes the existence of the world itself. Thus, this correlation serves as both a

concretisation of imagery and an articulation of meaning that operates aesthetically and emotionally. Similar uses of the conjunction “and” can be found extensively throughout Hughes’s poems.

Secondly, the conjunction “and” also serves to construct Hughes’s rhetorical style of repetition. For example, in the poem *A Letter to Anne*,

Since I left you, Anne,  
I have seen nothing but you.  
Every day  
Has been your face,  
And every night your hand  
And every road  
Your voice calling me.  
And every rock and every flower and tree  
Has been a touch of you.  
Nowhere  
Have I seen anything else but you,  
Anne.

Through the case of that poem, we can observe the use of “and” in the fifth, sixth, and eighth lines as a bridge to build a repetitive effect that follows a consistent pattern, despite employing different images. In other words, the use of the conjunction “and” in *A Letter to Anne* not only serves to correlate ideas through layered imagery but also to establish a repetitive pattern. This pattern corresponds to a refrain repetition, a type of repetition commonly found in songlike poetry [37]. However, in this context, it appears at the beginning of the line, as seen in the phrase “and every”, which is repeated several times. This kind of repetition pattern is referred to as anaphora [38], [39]. The anaphoric use of “and” is widely found throughout Hughes’s poems. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon to find poems that employ a complete refrain beginning with “and” in Hughes’s works. Therefore, the functions of “and” here not only as a correlative conjunction but also contributes to producing a rhetorical and musical effect within Hughes’s poems.

#### **The Function of “I” in Hughes’s Poems**

As previously, the researcher mentioned the figure “I” is one of the most dominant word units in Hughes’s poems (see Table 1). When we observe the trend of the “I” sound, as illustrated in Figure 2, it frequently appears on almost every page of *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (TCPLH) [8], although it is most prevalent between the first and roughly the two-hundredth pages. The use of the first-person perspective here does not merely indicate an individualisation of Hughes’s world; rather, the “I” also refers to the *lyric I*. Consequently, the dominance of the “I” figure signifies that Hughes’s poems belong to the lyric genre.

As lyric poetry, the presence of “I” is a figure constructed by the poetic language itself. Poetic language consists of a series of linguistic codes mechanised through the material play of language such as metre, rhyme, assonance, and alliteration, that also conveys emotion through the movement of these linguistic mechanisms [40]. Therefore, poetic language directly constructs the subject “I” as a poetic figure. The

bridge created through these linguistic codes simultaneously alienates the “I” figure from representing the emotional “I” of the poet [40]. However, the researcher dubious some Mutlu Konuk Blasing’s argument when reading deeply and closely into Hughes’s poems. Take, for instance, the poem *Negro* (1922):

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,  
Black like the depths of my Africa.

I’ve been a slave:

Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.  
I brushed the boots of Washington.

I’ve been a worker:

Under my hand the pyramids arose.  
I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.

I’ve been a singer:

All the way from Africa to Georgia  
I carried my sorrow songs.  
I made ragtime.

I’ve been a victim:

The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.  
They lynch me still in Mississippi.

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,  
Black like the depths of my Africa

When examining the poem, we encounter ten instances of the word “I.” The figure “I” here is indeed shaped by linguistic codes such as sound repetition that reinforces emotional intensity, alliteration, consonance, rhyme, and rhythm. Additionally, poetic styles such as simile through expressions like “as the night is black” and “like the depths of my Africa” in the opening and closing stanzas and historical symbolism repeated throughout stanzas two to five, further construct this figure. These linguistic codes possess their own mechanisms; however, such mechanisms are artificial and cannot be understood as autonomous systems.

The being of signs that emerge through simile and symbolism are closely tied to the social experiences and historical context of slavery in the past, both of which evoke a profound emotional resonance within the poem. This structural pattern is dominant—and indeed pervasive—throughout Hughes’s 868 poems. Consequently, the lyric “I” indirectly embodies a generic emotional-artificial connection to Hughes’s own lived experiences. In this sense, the lyric “I” represents an alternative manifestation of the self—an escape of the personal ego into a socially and historically situated “I”. This reading aligns with Roberts’s (2013) close reading of several of Hughes’s early poems, which led him to justify that Hughes’s lyric poetry operates as an act of escape from the private ego.

The issue of the lyric “I” as a form of self-escape was implicitly acknowledged by Hughes himself:



The data show that the word “like” appears with the highest frequency compared to others. The use of Voyant Tools allows for automation by displaying words considered unique and poetic by the algorithmic system behind it. The word “like” is positioned as n-gram and further connected with six preceding words to form a sixthgram and five succeeding words to form a fifthgram. This process is conducted to read the contextual usage of “like” and to examine its voice through Python. The result of Python processing produced 362 lines of context. Overall, these contexts reveal the use of simile as a figurative style, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** 10 context of “like” n-grams sample

Sample line	Literal	N-gram	Figurative
1	My soul has grown deep		the rivers
25	That the sea is strong		God's hand
75	I had wings to Fly		the eagle flies
113	song of the revolution Marching		fire over the world
139	re-rising Mass Voices, multiplying	Like	the roar of the sea
163	When death comes swift		a mountain
179	Texas where the sun Shines		the evil
225	The earth-meaning		the sky-meaning
297	tears and blood still mix		In Mississippi!
328	Slipping out from under them		waves of sea

The samples were randomly selected from the entire set of contextual lines. These ten lines came from ten different poems within *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes (TCPLH)* [8]. When several of these lines are examined closely, a parallelism of meaning emerges between the literal and figurative levels. For instance, the line “song of the revolution marching like fire over the world” compares the literal combinational relation “song of the revolution marching” with the figurative combinational relation “fire over the world.” Both are mentally and paradigmatically connected, as “the revolution” is inherently associated with “fire,” which conceptually conveys that a revolution is an act that burns everything—including the spirit of struggle itself. As paradigmatically, this relationship is ideologically linked beyond the text, crystallising emotively within the poem itself. Thus, the parallelism of meaning between one combinational relation and another, connected through “like,” functions to strengthen the poetic expression of Hughes’s poems.

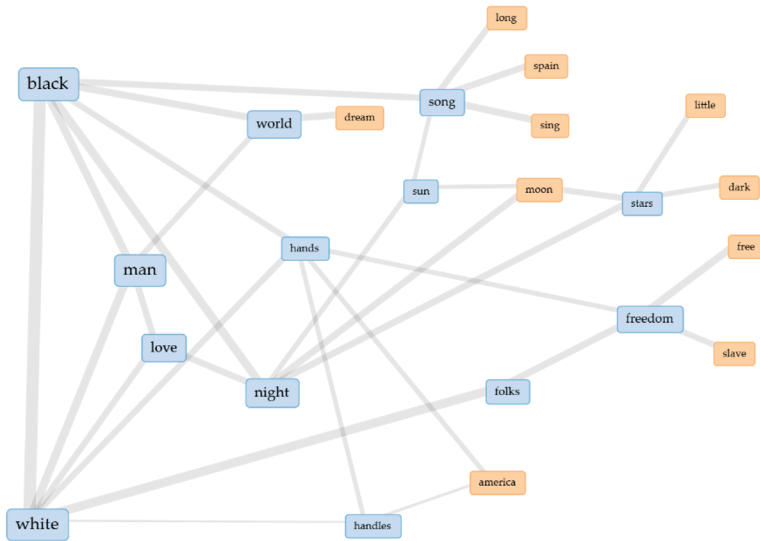
#### **The Function of “black” and “white” as Discourse Symbolism**

Apart from the word “like”, several other unique words also appear, such as “black”, “white”, “night”, “love”, “world”, “dream”, “dark”, “freedom”, “Harlem”, “folks”, “blues”, “death”, and so on, as shown through the Voyant Tools processing (figure 5). These words also appear in the word frequency list in Table 1. The word “black”, with a frequency of 275, and “white”, with 266, are the most prominent after “like.”





people. This is evident in the poem *Open Letter to the South* (1932), which calls for racial solidarity between Black and white workers against bourgeois domination. In this context, the white class is not identified solely as an upper class, but also as part of the exploited working class. When Hughes voices such ideas—particularly in his poems written after the 1930s—he can thus be identified as a multiracial and emancipatory poet [14], [15], [16].



**Fig. 8.** Automatic voyant tools processing of “white” and “black” relation

When examining the relationship between the data in Figures 6 and 7 and connecting it with Figure 8 as a validation process, several attributes such as “workers”, “man”, “men”, “folks”, “world”, “hands”, and “night” reveal a shared voice between the “white” and “black” as the oppressed—both as slaves and workers. This, to some extent, challenges Mustafa’s (2024) argument that tends to justify Hughes’s poem exclusively within the context of Afro-American oppression, since the thematic representations of exploitation also appear within the sphere of white people. Nevertheless, although some attributes of “white” correspond to those of “black”, the symbolisation of “black” as an aesthetic idea—to use Kant’s terminology—appears stronger and more dominant than “white”. This can also be traced back to previous discussions on the use of the article “de” in his poems and Hughes’s own affirmation of his racial pride in being Negro or Afro-American [8], [9], [13], [35], [45].

Therefore, when connected to the earlier rhetorical expressions, such as the crystallised markers manifested through simile and symbolisation, it becomes evident that these expressions are deeply intertwined with social experience and historical context, producing emotional resonance within the poems. Hence, Hughes’s poems exhibits a distinctive poetic voice—beyond the adaptation of blues and jazz

structures—through which he continually amplifies the voices of the oppressed and the Afro-American culture, often transcending the boundaries of his own race.

## 4 Conclusion

This study reveals two key dimensions: first, the poetic function within the physical structure of the poems; and second, its relationship with other language functions crystallised within the poetic function, which is positioned as a mental structure. These two dimensions are elaborated into three sub-discussions.

Firstly, it was found that Hughes's poems contain three most dominant lexical items—"the", "and", and "I". The function of "the", which shares a similar voices separation with "de", not only reinforces its definite and specific meaning, but also constructs varying forms of imagery that affirm Hughes's identity within the Afro-American diasporic. The conjunction "and" does not merely operate as a correlative connector, but also serves to produce a rhetorical and musical effect throughout Hughes's poems. Meanwhile, "I" functions not only to affirm the lyricism of Hughes's poetic genre but also to construct a sense of "I" transindividual through his lyrical compositions. Secondly, in relation to the poetic expressions in physical structure before, Hughes's poems predominantly exhibit patterns of repetition, such as refrain, anaphora, epistrophe, and symploce, which adaptation generate rhythmic structures jazz and blues patterns, thereby demonstrating an interconnection between poetic form and musical expression. Lastly, based on the frequency of dominant words detected through Voyant Tools, three distinctive lexical items were identified—"like", "black", and "white"—each associated with specific poetic functions. The word "like" reveals that Hughes's poetic voice is largely constructed through simile, whereas "black" and "white" are related to the symbolisation of Afro-American socio-historical identities discourse.

Hughes's poems embodies an unique poetic voice: beyond adapting the structural patterns of blues and jazz, his poetic expression consistently amplifies the voices of the oppressed and celebrates Afro-American culture—at times even transcending racial boundaries. This distinctive voice constitutes the hallmark of Langston Hughes's poems. Therefore, this experimental distant-narrow-deep reading enables both the analysis and interpretation of the poetic voice unique to a specific poet in future research. This suggestions may explore both the surface-level poetic structures but also their internal frameworks, such as discourses that sustain the poetics. In addition, the future research may undertake distant reading by combining it with either a wider-shallow, wider-deep, narrow-close, or narrow-shallow approach.

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