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Too Cold to Sink: The Irony of Survival in "Life is Fine" Using Formalism

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Abstract

This paper explores Langston Hughes's poem "Life is Fine" from a formalist perspective, focusing on how the poem's structural, linguistic, and literary features create a big irony about the survival of life and resilience. Through close evaluation of Hughes's use of rhyme, repetition, imagery, and tone, the study demonstrates how the poem contrasts the speaker's despair and attempts to end his life with an ultimate affirmation to live the life. The poem's rhythmic patterns create a controlled, almost musical quality that contrasts with the dark subject matter, producing a tension that focuses on the complexity of human emotions. The repetition of key phrases motivates a shift in mood from hopelessness to a resigned acceptance. This synergy of form and content shows that the poem's irony is not just thematic but deeply integrated into its formal elements. Finally, the analysis explores how "Life is Fine" depicts survival not as mere fortitude, but as an ironic, multifaceted experience shaped by suffering and hope.

Keywords: formalism, irony, Langston Hughes, Life is Fine, poetry analysis, survival.

Introduction

Langston Hughes's poem "Life is Fine" stands out as a powerful poem that explores struggle and survival. The poem tells the story of a speaker who, overwhelmed by despair, makes many suicide attempts. However, every time, he finally recognizes that life's worth surpasses the pain and suffering he experiences. This narrative of

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despair, followed by an affirmation of life, depicts a profound emotional and psychological journey. The poem's power relies not only on its content but also on how its form and style shape this journey, creating a layered and complex message about the survival of life.

This paper uses a formalist critical approach to analyze "Life is Fine." Formalism focuses on studying the text itself, emphasizing its internal features such as structure, language, sound patterns, and literary devices, without relying on the author's biography or historical context (Rosenblatt, 1995). By applying formalistic criticism, this analysis attempts to reveal how Hughes's deliberate use of rhyme, repetition, and vivid imagery contributes to the poem's ironic tone and overall meaning.

The poem's form, a consistent rhyme pattern and rhythmic pattern, contrasts with the dark themes it shows. This contrast constructs an ironic tension between the desire for death and the affirmation of life, flagging the complexity of human emotions and the survival of life. Repetition of key phrases throughout the poem reinforces the speaker's vacillation between despair and hope. The imagery of water symbolizes both danger and renewal. This study argues that the irony in "Life is Fine" comes primarily from these formal elements, exploring that despite life's difficulties, its value remains flawless. Thus, Hughes's poem teaches a timeless lesson about resilience through its careful artistic form and style.

In this article, the focus will be on how the specific rhyme schemes and rhythms utilized by the poet serve to constrain the expression of despair. Secondly, I will look at how repetition is used as a structuring element, which serves to change the tone of the poem from a state of despair and hopelessness into affirmation. Thirdly, how the interplay of poetry and theme construes survival as a complicated process.

Langston Hughes's poem "Life is Fine" has predominantly focused on its historical and cultural importance. Many studies spotlight Hughes's influential role in the Renaissance, a period marked by a thriving of African American art and literature, and examine how his work reflects themes of African American identity, social struggle, and racial pride (Ram Prasad, 1986; Gates, 1988). Furthermore, Tidwell (1981) argues that Hughes's use of the "a a b" blues pattern creates a rhythmic irony that teases despair, transforming a narrative of failure into one of endurance. These analyses often keep the poem within the wider social and political context of early 20th-century America, showing how Hughes's experiences and cultural background inform his poetic expression. While such contextual methods are valuable for understanding the poem's cultural significance, they tend to overlook the poem's formal qualities, such as its language, structure, and literary techniques, that shape its meaning and emotional impression.

As defined by Abrams (1999), formalism provides a critical framework that gives stress to the analysis of a literary work's intrinsic mechanics, including its use of literary devices, sound patterns, and narrative structure, to show its meaning. This approach separates the text from extrinsic factors and highlights how the poem's form contributes to its whole effect. Likewise, Brooks (1947) emphasizes the importance of irony as a literary device that formalism can expose, especially in poetry, where tone and structure often create layers of meaning beyond the literal meaning. In the same way, Tracy (2015) argues that the "blues-poem" is characterized by a "tragic-comic" duality. Tracy posits that the repetitive structure and steady rhythm of the Blues do not minimize the speaker's suffering but rather provide a "ritualized catharsis." This formal arrangement allows the speaker to objectify their pain through a rhythmic framework, transforming a private impulse toward death into a public, rhythmic performance of endurance. Tracy suggests that the "buoyancy" of the poem is a direct result of this musicality, which allows the poet to "sing" through the trauma rather than being silenced by it.

While scholars such as Vendler (1988) have used formalism to analyze Hughes's poetry, there is a lack of focused studies on the specific use of irony related to the survival of life and resilience in "Life is Fine." This gap in the literature leads to a formalistic reading that deeply examines how the poem's form produces its irony and conveys its complex lesson about the wish to live. By addressing the gap, this study aims to enhance the critical understanding of Hughes's poem from a formalist viewpoint.

Methods and Materials

Methodology is the strategic blueprint that leads the entire investigation. It is the bridge between the research questions and the findings or results, ensuring the study's credibility and reproducibility. It provides reliability and validity, a logical framework, justification of the choices, minimizes bias, and facilitates. To ensure all these, the following methodology is employed in this study. This study applies a qualitative research design grounded in formalistic literary analysis to find out the study's objectives. The focus of the study is on the intrinsic characteristics of Langston Hughes's poem "Life is Fine," evaluating how the poem's formal elements create meaning and irony without focusing on the extrinsic contexts, such as the author's historical background and biography. It is based on primary sources of data. The primary data is taken from the excerpt of the poem "Life is Fine." The poem is collected from an authorized source, the textbook of the B. Ed. First Year under Tribhuvan University, to ensure the accuracy of the poem. Close reading, a key formalistic approach as described by Wimsatt and Beardsley (1946), guides the analysis of the data.

An in-depth study is conducted to extract the poem's ideas. The poem is examined and evaluated meticulously, line by line, to identify patterns in language, rhyme, rhythm, imagery, and repetition. Special focus is placed on shifts in tone and how these elements contribute to the poem's ironic tension. The analysis is strictly textual, maintaining a formalist approach that separates the poem from outer interpretations. These ensure the pursuit of knowledge never comes at the expense of dignity, safety, and the rights of the people involved in the research. These are formal requirements that protect the work from harm, keep it transparent, maintain privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality, and ensure research integrity and build public trust.

For all these reasons, this study includes an analysis of a published literary text, the poem "Life is Fine" by Langston Hughes. There is no ethical concern related to human subjects. Citations and acknowledgment of all sources are maintained to ensure ethics.

Result and Discussions

Based on the above-mentioned objectives of the study and the analysis of the data, the study led to the following results and findings.

Structure and Form: "Life is Fine" by Hughes contains three quatrains with a consistent 'a b b' rhyme pattern. This regularity contrasts with the haphazard subject of suicide, creating agitation that suggests control amidst despair and discouragement.

Repetition: The lines "I went down to the river" and "Life is fine!" are the repetitive verse lines that establish a rhythmic pattern. Both narrate and emphasize the fluctuating emotions of the speaker. Repetition serves to reinforce the ironic contrast between the desire to end life and the affirmation of life.

Imagery and Symbolism: The river symbolizes death and the unknown. The line "I fell into the river and rose once again" symbolizes failed tries at death and the resilience of life. The cold water contrasts with the warmth implied by "Life is fine," boosting irony in the poem.

Tone and Mood: The tone of the poem shifts from despair to optimistic irony. The use of simple and direct language makes the poem accessible, but it also deepens the emotional impact. The final refrain, "Life is fine!" is both a statement of survival of life and an implicit irony about the hardships that persist in the poem.

Based on the above-mentioned results of the formalist evaluation of "Life is Fine," the research produces the following key findings regarding the synergy of form and irony:

Structural Irony and Rhythmic Control: The study finds that the poem's consistent quatrain structure and AABB rhyme pattern create a "singsong," musical

quality. This formal regularity serves as a deliberate counterpoint to the poem's chaotic, morbid subject of suicide. The finding suggests that the verse's "controlled" nature mirrors psychological resilience, providing a sense of order even amidst the speaker's despair.

Repetition as a Linguistic Bridge: Repetition functions as the primary catalyst for the poem's shift from hopelessness to "averse acceptance." The findings indicate that recurring phrases like "I went down to the river" and the final refrain "Life is fine!" do more than narrate; they establish a rhythmic pulse that reinforces the speaker's fluctuating state. The repetition of the title phrase after failed attempts at death changes the statement from a simple observation to a hard-won realization of survival.

Survival as a Multifaceted Irony: The analysis concludes that survival in Hughes's work is not depicted as "simple fortitude" but as a complex, ironic experience in which the impulse to give up and the desire to live co-exist. The river's cold imagery symbolizes a visceral rejection of death, culminating to a "heart-rending study of buoyancy." Ultimately, the findings show that the poem's irony is deeply integrated into its formal elements, proving that the value of life persists not despite suffering, but through the very experience of it.

The formal elements of the poem produce irony by juxtaposing the cheerful form with the macabre content. The consistent rhyme pattern and rhythm generate a singsong effect that contrasts with the speaker's suicidal feelings. This contrast focuses on the complexity of human survival and the impulse to give up, and the equally strong desire to live and co-exist of the two. The repetition of the line "Life is fine!" after failed attempts at suicide suggests that survival is not a simple acceptance but a hard-gained realization. Formalism exposes how the art of Hughes shapes this very fine irony, making the poem a heart-rending study of buoyancy. To be clear on the topic, we should look at how Hughes uses the mechanics of the blues tradition to transform a narrative of hopelessness into resilient perseverance.

The Mechanics of Irony: Form versus Content: In literary analysis, irony often comes from a divergence between expectations and reality. Hughes implies a singsong rhythm and a consistent 'a a b b' rhyme scheme, structural choices usually reserved for lighthearted verse or children's playing rhymes. However, the content is anything but light; it records specific, harrowing tries at self-destruction, from jumping into a frozen river to ascending a high building.

The irony here is very functional rather than merely stylistic. By trapping sad thoughts within a "cheerful" structural cage, Hughes forces the readers to experience the

speaker's psychological state: a forced, rhythmic doggedness. The jolting meter suggests a heartbeat that refuses to stop, even when the mind wants it to.

The Blues Tradition and the Singsong Effect: The "singsong effect" mentioned in the poem is rooted in the Blues aesthetic. In Blues music, tragic lyrics are often set against a steady, driving beat. This contradiction serves a common purpose; it acknowledges pain while providing a rhythmic structure to tolerate it.

When the speaker discusses the water as "cold" or the building as "high," the rhyme scheme (e.g., "cry" and "die") provides a sense of inevitability. Yet, the very act of maintaining the rhyme requires a level of creative control that juxtaposes the uncertainty of a suicidal impulse. The form itself becomes a "gravity" aid, keeping the speaker's head above the metaphorical and literal water.

The Duality of Survival: The passage focuses on the "complexity of human survival" as a conflict between the impulse to surrender and the biological or spiritual wish to persist. This is the most evident in the shifts between the stanzas describing the attempts and the ebullient exclamations that follow.

The repetition of "Life is fine!" works as a refrain. In a formalist sense, repetition usually reinforces a theme, but here, it acts as a "hard-received realization." It is not an unworldly statement of fact; it is a defensive wall built against the previous stanzas' darkness. The irony is "fine" (in the sense of being delicate and sharp) because the poem suggests that the desire to live is often born exactly now when death feels the most imminent.

Survival as an Art Form: Finally, the passage suggests that Hughes's "art" is what shapes this irony into a study of resilience. At the end of the poem, the tone shifts from the "morbid" to the "resolute." The formal elements do not change, and the rhythm remains steady, but our perception of that rhythm does. What initially felt like a mocking, upbeat tempo becomes a defiant pulse.

Through the means of formalism, we see that "Life is Fine" is not just a poem about choosing life; it is a poem that applies its own structural rigidity to modeling the act of staying alive. The "buoyancy" is not the absence of weight, but the structural integrity required to float despite it.

Conclusion

Using formalism, this analysis shows that the poem "Life is Fine" uses form, repetition, and imagery to produce an ironic portrayal of the survival of life. The structure of the poem and the tone highlight the tension between despair and hope in

life. Hughes's work reminds readers that the value of life persists despite suffering and hardships. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how formal elements in poetry convey complex emotional and philosophical themes.

This analysis demonstrates how Langston Hughes's "Life is Fine" utilizes internal mechanics, specifically structure, repetition, and sensory imagery, to construct a deeply ironic portrayal of human resilience through formalism. Rather than relying on external historical context, the poem's meaning is derived from the organic unity of its parts.

The structure follows the a a b b stanza pattern of the blues, establishing a rhythmic pulse that swings between deep despair and defiant survival. Each narrative follows a similar trajectory in which the speaker attempts self-destruction, only to be thwarted by a physical reality, the coldness of the water, or the height of a building. This kind of life journey creates a structural irony where the instruments of death become the catalysts for a sensory awakening to life.

Repetition serves as the heartbeat of the poem. The line "I'm still here!" and the celebratory comparison "Fine as wine!" change the grim subject of suicide into a rhythmic chant of endurance. By repeating these declarations, Hughes defamiliarizes the tragedy of suffering, reframing survival not as a passive state, but as a rhythmic, recurring choice of human beings.

Furthermore, the tension between the poem's melancholic content and its buoyant, lyrical meter produces a complex emotional setting. The imagery of the words "cold" and "high" creates an emotional friction that grounds the readers in the physical world. Finally, Hughes's formal choices emphasize the inherent paradox of the human condition, such as the fact that the value of life is often most clearly realized at the brink of losing one's life.

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Appendix A

Life Is Fine

I went down to the river,
I sat down on the bank.
I tried to think but couldn't,
So I jumped in and sank.

I came up once and hollered!
I came up twice and cried!
If that water hadn't a-been so cold
I might've sunk and died.

But it was Cold in that water! It was cold!

I took the elevator
Sixteen floors above the ground.
I thought about my baby
And thought I would jump down.

I stood there and I hollered!
I stood there and I cried!
If it hadn't a-been so high
I might've jumped and died.

But it was High up there! It was high!

So since I'm still here livin',
I guess I will live on.
I could've died for love—
But for livin' I was born

Though you may hear me holler,
And you may see me cry—
I'll be dogged, sweet baby,
If you gonna see me die.

Life is fine! Fine as wine! Life is fine!