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A Ballad That Might Have Been.

The poem “Madam And Her Might Have Been” by Langston Hughes is about unrequited love. Those who have had one or more experiences of being in a relationship with another person, or at least attempted to begin one with someone without success, would find this subject immediately recognizable. As such, the appeal is that the poem is directly relevant to a wide audience, assuming that most have attempted to begin a relationship with another person without success owing to fear of insecurity. The poem reveals a relationship that fails to begin. A man provides much courtly affection to a woman with a view to establishing a romantic relationship with her. However, the woman is afraid of being hurt in that relationship. She succumbs to that fear and the relationship fails to materialize. This is a common theme that most readers would be able to relate to thus it has a common appeal.

The familiar theme of unreciprocated love in the poem is told through streetwise dialogue between a man and woman. This makes it even more familiar and thus enhances relevance to the reader. The dialogue is recognizable as American vernacular speech, “you better leave - / you got some’n else / up your sleeve” (22-24). Further to enhancing relevance and therefore appeal to the reader, vernacular speech provides a feeling of accessibility. The simple vernacular phrases

in the poem helps the reader to grasp the dialogue without much intellectual labour and learned experience with poetic craft. The language is basic and to the point.

There is no pretense. It does not try to be clever.

He said, in me  
You've got no trust.  
I said, I don't want  
My heart to bust. (29-32)

The dialogue is presented as if a real conversation is taking place. Hence the poem is naturally appreciable.

The poem looks like a ballad with its quatrains and alternating iambic lines of longer and shorter ballad meters. A traditional ballad meter consists of alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. The rhyme scheme of a ballad quatrain is a,b,c,b. Only the second and fourth lines are rhymed. The rhyme scheme in the poem is consistent to this rule. However, the meter in the poem is inconsistent. They are mostly slightly shorter with length variations than a tetrameter and trimeter. The significance of presenting the poem in this way is to point out that the poem is almost a ballad but not quite so, just as the story of the romantic relationship in the poem almost materialized, but failed to begin. Changing the structure of a traditional ballad in this way effectively expresses the frustration of unrequited love. The ballad is traditionally used to illustrate love and romance. The ballad qualities of this poem reveal a relationship that almost took place, just as the poem almost became a ballad.

Teaching Resources:

A reading of the poem by Janeane Davis and her brief interpretation of the poem:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VjW-LZi9S4s>

Webster, Harvey Curtis. "One-Way Poetry." *Poetry*, vol. 75, no. 5, 1950, pp. 300–302.

*JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/20591147](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20591147).

## Madam and Her Might-Have-Been

I had two husbands.  
I could of had three—  
But my Might-Have-Been  
Was too good for me.

When you grow up the hard way  
Sometimes you don't know  
What's too good to be true,  
Just might be so.

He worked all the time,  
Spent his money on me—  
First time in my life  
I had anything free.

I said, Do you love me?  
Or am I mistaken?  
You're always giving  
And never taking.

He said, Madam, I swear  
All I want is you.  
Right then and there  
I knowed we was through!

I told him, Jackson,  
You better leave—  
You got some'n else  
Up your sleeve:

When you think you got bread  
It's always a stone—

Nobody loves nobody  
For yourself alone.

He said, In me  
You've got no trust.  
I said, I don't want  
My heart to bust.

The following two poems are English translations of Portuguese poetry.

A poem by Luís Vaz de Camões, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese poet and explorer. The poem is dedicated “to a slave named Barbara, whom he loved in India”.

A poem by Camilo de Almeida Pessanha, a late 19<sup>th</sup> century / early 20<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese “poet, teacher, lawyer, judge and opium addict”. The poem is dedicated to his Chinese mistress.

*Endechas a ùa cativa com quem andava  
d'amores na Índia, chamada Bárbara*

Aquela cativa,  
que me tem cativo,  
porque nela vivo  
já não quer que viva.  
Eu nunca vi rosa  
em suaves molhos,  
que para meus olhos  
fosse mais fermosa.

Nem no campo flores,  
nem no céu estrelas,  
me parecem belas  
como os meus amores.  
Rosto singular,  
olhos sossegados,  
pretos e cansados,  
mas não de matar.

Ûa graça viva,  
que neles lhe mora,  
para ser senhora  
de quem é cativa.  
Pretos os cabelos,  
onde o povo vão  
perde opinião  
que os louros são belos.

*Stanzas to a slave named Barbara,  
whom he loved in India*

That lovely slave  
to whom I'm enslaved,  
since she's my life,  
would have me not live.  
I've never seen a rose  
in a gentle bouquet  
as lovely as she looks  
to my smitten eyes.

No star from above  
nor flower in the field  
seems to me as fair  
as the one I love.  
Her face is unique  
and her eyes serene,  
black and weary,  
though not of killing.

That grace so alive  
that gleams in her eyes  
makes her a lady  
although she's my slave.  
Black is her hair,  
which contradicts  
the common opinion  
that blondes are fair.

Pretidão de Amor,  
tão doce a figura,  
que a neve lhe jura  
que trocara a cor.  
Leda mansidão  
que o siso acompanha;  
bem parece estranha,  
mas *bárbara* não.

Presença serena  
que a tormenta amansa,  
nela enfim descansa  
toda a minha pena.  
Esta é a cativa  
que me tem cativo,  
e, pois nela vivo,  
é força que viva.

This blackness of Love  
cuts such a sweet figure  
that the snow, if it could,  
would change its color.  
Wisdom is part of her  
gentle, glad nature;  
she indeed seems strange  
but not at all *barbarous*.

Presence of peace  
that calms the storm,  
in her all my cares  
at long last cease.  
This is my slave  
to whom I'm enslaved,  
and since she's my life,  
for her I must live.



## DESEJOS

Se medito no gozo que promete  
 A sua boca fresca e pequenina  
 E o seio mergulhado em renda fina,  
 Sob a curva ligeira do corpete.

Desejo, nuns transportes de gigante,  
 Estreitá-la de rijo entre meus braços,  
 Até quase esmagar nestes abraços  
 A sua carne branca e palpitante;

Como, da Ásia nos bosques tropicais,  
 Apertam em espiral auriluzente,  
 Os músculos hercúleos da serpente  
 Aos troncos das palmeiras colossais...

E como ao depois, quando o cansaço  
 A sepulta na morna letargia,  
 Dormitando repousa todo o dia  
 À sombra da palmeira o corpo lasso;

## DESIRES

If I meditate upon the joy in  
 Her fresh and minimal mouth,  
 And in her breast dipped in fine lace,  
 Beneath the slight curve of the corset,

I wish, in raptures of giant,  
 To have her tightly in these arms,  
 Nearly crush in my embrace  
 Her flesh white and trembling;

Like in Asia's woods,  
 In gold lucent spirals,  
 Herculean serpents' strength  
 Holds the colossal palms...

And after, when fatigue  
 Has her buried in warm lethargy,  
 The whole day she rests in sleepiness,  
 In the palm's shadow, her body drained;

Eu quisera também, adormecido,  
Dos fantasmas da febre ver o mar,  
Mas sempre sob o azul do seu olhar.  
Envolto no calor do seu vestido;

Como os ébrios chineses delirantes  
Aspiram, já dormindo, o fumo quieto  
Que o seu longo cachimbo predilecto  
No ambiente espalhava pouco antes...

And I'd wish in the same sleep  
To gaze at the sea from the phantoms of fever,  
But ever under the blue of her eyes,  
Wrapped in the heat of her dress;

Like the inebriated, delirious Chinese  
Inhaling , already sleeping, the slow smoke  
Their long favourite pipes  
Drew into the air just now...