

## READ MORE

## Orwell and His Works

Davison, Peter Hobley. *George Orwell: A Literary Life*. New York: St. Martin's, 1995.

"George Orwell: (1903-1950)" (<http://gutenberg.net.au/pages/orwell.html>): *Gutenberg site on the works of Orwell containing links to ebooks.*

## British Colonialism: Myanmar (Burma)

Dicks, Nicholas B., ed. *Colonialism and Culture*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 1992.

"Inside Burma: Land of Fear" (<http://pilgercarton.com/burma>): *Web companion to 1996 documentary that includes text, images, and video clips.*

## Salvation

Langston Hughes

Among the chief figures of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, Langston Hughes (1902-1967) is one of the best-known poets and playwrights in America. A native of Mississippi, Hughes also wrote numerous essays that detail life in the South during the early part of this century. His novels and his autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*, are still read widely. In this selection, he captures the trauma and disillusionment he experienced during a childhood incident.

The title and first line of this piece, though ironic, stand as models for the kinds of beginnings that never fail to pique the reader's interest. Although brief, this essay is an emotional hour of force in which the author assumes the persona of himself as an adolescent. What result here is testimony to the power of narration as a tool for analysis and persuasion.

I was saved from sin when I was going on thirteen. But not really saved. It happened like this. There was a big revival at my Auntie Reed's church. Every night for weeks there had been much preaching, singing, praying, and shouting, and some very hardened sinners had been brought to Christ, and the membership of the church had grown by leaps and bounds. Then just before the revival ended, they held a special meeting for children, "to bring the young lambs to the fold." My aunt spoke of it for days ahead. That night I was escorted to the front row and placed on the mourners' bench with all the other young sinners, who had not yet been brought to Jesus.

My aunt told me that when you were saved you saw a light, and something happened to you inside. And Jesus came into your life. And God was with you from then on! She said you could see and hear and feel Jesus in your soul. I believed her. I had heard a great many old people say

the same thing and it seemed to me they ought to know. So I sat there calmly in the hot, crowded church, waiting for Jesus to come to me.

The preacher preached a wonderful rhythmical sermon, all means and shouts and lonely cries and dire pictures of hell, and then he sang a song about the ninety and nine safe in the fold, but one little lamb was left out in the cold. Then he said: "Won't you come? Won't you come to Jesus? Young lambs, won't you come?" And he held out his arms to all us young sinners there on the mourners' bench. And the little girls cried. And some of them jumped up and went to Jesus right away. But most of us just sat there.

A great many old people came and knelt around us and prayed, old women with jet-black faces and braided hair, old men with work-gnarled hands. And the church sang a song about the lower lights are burning, some poor sinners to be saved. And the whole building rocked with prayer and song.

Still I kept waiting to see Jesus.

Finally all the young people had gone to the altar and were saved, but one boy and me. He was a rounder's son named Westley. Westley and I were surrounded by sisters and deacons praying. It was very hot in the church, and getting late now. Finally Westley said to me in a whisper: "God damn! I'm tired o' sitting here. Let's get up and be saved." So he got up and was saved.

Then I was left all alone on the mourners' bench. My aunt came and knelt at my knees and cried, while prayers and songs swirled all around me in the little church. The whole congregation prayed for me alone, in a mighty wail of means and voices. And I kept waiting serenely for Jesus, waiting, waiting—but he didn't come. I wanted to see him, but nothing happened to me. Nothing! I wanted something to happen to me, but nothing happened.

I heard the songs and the minister saying: "Why don't you come? My dear child, why don't you come to Jesus? Jesus is waiting for you. He wants you. Why don't you come? Sister Reed, what is this child's name?"

"Langston," my aunt sobbed.

"Langston, why don't you come? Why don't you come and be saved? Oh, Lamb of God! Why don't you come?"

Now it was really getting late. I began to be ashamed of myself, holding everything up so long. I began to wonder what God thought about Westley, who certainly hadn't seen Jesus either, but who was now sitting proudly on the platform, swinging his knickerbockered legs and grinning down at me, surrounded by deacons and old women on their knees praying. God had not struck Westley dead for taking his name in vain or for lying in the temple. So I decided that maybe to save further trouble, I'd better lie, too, and say that Jesus had come, and get up and be saved.

So I got up.

Suddenly the whole room broke into a sea of shouting, as they saw me rise. Waves of rejoicing swept the place. Women leaped in the air. My aunt threw her arms around me. The minister took me by the hand and led me to the platform.

When things quieted down, in a hushed silence, punctuated by a few ecstatic "Amen's," all the new young lambs were blessed in the name of God. Then joyous singing filled the room.

That night, for the last time in my life but one—for I was a big boy twelve years old—I cried. I cried, in bed alone, and couldn't stop. I buried my head under the quilts, but my aunt heard me. She woke up and told my uncle I was crying because the Holy Ghost had come into my life, and because I had seen Jesus. But I was really crying because I couldn't bear to tell her that I had lied, that I had deceived everybody in the church, that I hadn't seen Jesus, and that now I didn't believe there was a Jesus any more, since he didn't come to help me.

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## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

### Content

- What is Hughes's purpose in recalling this event?
- The author's portrayal of the revival meeting is extremely realistic. What rhetorical techniques make it so?
- What exactly is a religious revival?
- What biblical metaphor is Hughes alluding to when he tells the reader that this was to be a special meeting "to bring the young lambs to the fold"?
- Why does Hughes spend time talking about Westley? How is young Langston different from this boy?
- What does the author's waiting so long before going up to be "saved" tell you about him?
- Explain why Langston cries so much after coming home. Is there only one reason behind his tears? What does the last paragraph tell you about the young Langston?

### Strategy and Style

- The telling of this story is enhanced by the author's description of the church and the members of the congregation. In which paragraphs is Hughes's facility with description most evident?
- What examples of metaphoric language do you find in this essay? How do such figures of speech help Hughes accomplish his purpose?
- Hughes often makes use of a childlike perspective to relate the incident at his aunt's church. What details help him create that perspective? Does he use words like those a child might use?
- What is Hughes's attitude or tone when recalling this incident?

## ENGAGING THE TEXT

- Write about one of your religious experiences, comparing or contrasting it to that of Hughes. Include specific reference to his essay.
- Write an imaginary interview (both your questions and his answers) with Hughes, asking him about his experiences at the revival meeting. Hughes's answers should be consistent with what he writes in the essay.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR SUSTAINED WRITING

- At one time or another, we all have been pressured into doing things we did not want to do. Recount such an incident from your experience; make sure to describe your feelings both during that experience and after it occurred. If appropriate, narrate the incident in a letter addressed to the individual or individuals who did the pressuring. In the process, however, make reference to Hughes's experience in "Salvation" and compare or contrast it to your own.
- Read Ortiz Cofar's "A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood" in chapter 2. Then write an essay that draws similarities and differences between the kinds of families in which Hughes and Ortiz Cofar grew up. In other words, from the reading, draw inferences that would compare and contrast the emotional lives these two authors experienced as children.
- Describe a religious ceremony that has or used to have significance for you. As clearly and convincingly as you can, describe the emotional or spiritual benefits you derive or derived from that ceremony. Address your essay to someone who you know is skeptical about the value of religious or social ceremonies and observances. Support your position by including facts, ideas, and opinions about this ceremony or about religious or social ceremonies in general which you research in at least three secondary sources found in your college library or on the Internet. (We list a few below to get you started.) Make sure to include and cite your research, using a format or style approved by your instructor.

## READ MORE

### Hughes and His Works

Gates, Henry Louis, and K. A. Appiah, eds. *Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York: Amistad, 1993.

"Langston Hughes." (<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/pnm/PID/83>). *Biography and Hughes's life and work, along with biography and important links.*