

The Black Clown —Langston Hughes

A dramatic monologue to be spoken by a pure-blooded Negro in the white suit and hat of a clown, to the music of a piano, or an orchestra.

THE MOOD

A gay and low-down blues. Comic entrance like the clowns in the circus. Humorous defiance. Melancholy jazz. Then defiance again followed by loud joy. A burst of music. Strutting and dancing. Then sudden sadness again. Back bent as in the fields. The slow step. The bowed head. "Nobody knows de trouble I've had." Flinching under the whip. The spiritual syncopated. Determined to laugh. A bugle call. Gay, martial music. Walking proudly, almost prancing. But gradually subdued to a slow, heavy pace. "Sometimes I feel like a motherless chile." Turning futilely from one side to the other. But now a harsh and bitter note creeps into the music. Over-burdened. Backing away angrily. Frantic with humiliation and helplessness. The music is like a mournful tom-tom in the dark! But out of sadness it rises to defiance and determination. A hymn of faith echoes the fighting "Marseillaise." Tearing off his clown's suit, throwing down the hat of a fool, and standing forth, straight and strong, in the clothes of a modern man, he proclaims himself.

THE POEM

You laugh
Because I'm poor and black and funny—
Not the same as you—
Because my mind is dull
And dice instead of books will do
For me to play with
When the day is through.

I am the fool of the whole world.
Laugh and push me down.
Only in song and laughter
I rise again—a black clown.
Strike up the music.
Let it be gay.
Only in joy
Can a clown have his day.

Three hundred years
In the cotton and the cane,
Plowing and reaping
With no gain—
Empty handed as I began.

A slave—under the whip,
Beaten and sore.
God! Give me laughter
That I can stand more.

God! Give me the spotted
Garments of a clown
So that the pain and the shame
Will not pull me down.

Freedom!
Abe Lincoln done set me free—
One little moment
To dance with glee.

Then sadness again—
No land, no house, no job,
No place to go.
Black—in a white world
Where cold winds blow.
The long struggle for life:
No schools, no work—
Not wanted here; not needed there—
Black—you can die.
Nobody will care—

Yet clinging to the ladder,
Round by round,
Trying to climb up,
Forever pushed down.

Day after day
White spit in my face—
Worker and clown am I
For the "civilized" race.

Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!
Scorn crushing me down.
Laugh at me! Laugh at me!
Just a black clown!

Laugh at me then,
All the world round—
From Africa to Georgia
I'm only a clown!

But no! Not forever
Like this will I be:
Here are my hands
That can really make me free!

Suffer and struggle.
Work, pray, and fight.
Smash my way through
To Manhood's true right.

Say to all foemen:
You can't keep me down!
Tear off the garments
That make me a clown!

Rise from the bottom,
Out of the slime!
Look at the stars yonder
Calling through time!

Cry to the world
That all might understand:
I was once a black clown
But now—
I'm a man!