

# MLA Literature Paper (Peel)

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Peel 1

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## Opposing Voices in "Ballad of the Landlord"

Langston Hughes's "Ballad of the Landlord" is narrated through four voices, each with its own perspective on the poem's action. These opposing voices--of a tenant, a landlord, the police, and the press--dramatize a black man's experience in a society dominated by whites.

The main voice in the poem is that of the tenant, who, as the last line tells us, is black. The tenant is characterized by his informal, nonstandard speech. He uses slang ("Ten Bucks"), contracted words ('member, more'n), and nonstandard grammar ("These steps is broken down"). This colloquial English suggests the tenant's separation from the world of convention, represented by the formal voices of the police and the press, which appear later in the poem.

Although the tenant uses nonstandard English, his argument is organized and logical. He begins with a reasonable complaint and a gentle reminder that the complaint is already a week old: "My roof has sprung a leak. / Don't you 'member I told you about it / Way last week?" (lines 2-4). In the second stanza, he appeals diplomatically to the landlord's self-interest: "These steps is broken down. / When you come up yourself / It's a wonder you don't fall down" (6-8). In the third stanza, when the landlord has

Title is centered.

Thesis states Peel's main idea.

Details from the poem illustrate Peel's point.

The first citation to lines of the poem includes the word "lines." Subsequent citations from the poem are cited with line numbers alone.

responded to his complaints with a demand for rent money, the tenant becomes more forceful, but his voice is still reasonable: “Ten Bucks you say is due? / Well, that’s Ten Bucks more’n I’ll pay you / Till you fix this house up new” (10-12).

Topic sentence focuses on an interpretation.

The fourth stanza marks a shift in the tone of the argument. At this point the tenant responds more emotionally, in reaction to the landlord’s threats to evict him. By the fifth stanza, the tenant has unleashed his anger: “Um-huh! You talking high and mighty” (17). Hughes uses an exclamation point for the first time; the tenant is raising his voice at last. As the argument gets more heated, the tenant finally resorts to the language of violence: “You ain’t gonna be able to say a word / If I land my fist on you” (19-20).

Transition prepares readers for the next topic.

These are the last words the tenant speaks in the poem. Perhaps Hughes wants to show how black people who threaten violence are silenced. When a new voice is introduced--the landlord’s--the poem shifts to italics:

*Police! Police!*  
*Come and get this man!*  
*He’s trying to ruin the government*  
*And overturn the land! (21-24)*

Peel interprets the landlord’s response.

This response is clearly an overreaction to a small threat. Instead of dealing with the tenant directly, the landlord shouts for the police. His hysterical voice--marked by repetitions and punctuated with exclamation points--reveals his disproportionate fear and outrage. And his conclusions are equally excessive: This black man, he claims, is out to “ruin the government” and “overturn the land.” Although the landlord’s overreaction is humorous, it is

sinister as well, because the landlord knows that, no matter how excessive his claims are, he has the police and the law on his side.

In line 25, the regular meter and rhyme of the poem break down, perhaps showing how an arrest disrupts everyday life. The “voice” in lines 25-29 has two parts: the clanging sound of the police (“Copper’s whistle! / Patrol bell!”) and, in sharp contrast, the unemotional, factual tone of a police report (“Arrest. / Precinct Station. / Iron cell.”).

Peel shows how meter and rhyme support the poem’s meaning.

The last voice in the poem is the voice of the press, represented in newspaper headlines: “MAN THREATENS LANDLORD / TENANT HELD NO BAIL / JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL” (31-33). Meter and rhyme return here, as if to show that once the tenant is arrested, life can go on as usual. The language of the press, like that of the police, is cold and distant, and it gives the tenant less and less status. In line 31, he is a “man”; in line 32, he has been demoted to a “tenant”; and in line 33, he has become a “Negro,” or just another statistic.

Peel sums up her interpretation.

By using four opposing voices in “Ballad of the Landlord,” Hughes effectively dramatizes different views of minority assertiveness. To the tenant, assertiveness is informal and natural, as his language shows; to the landlord, it is a dangerous threat, as his hysterical response suggests. The police response is, like the language that describes it, short and sharp. Finally, the press’s view of events, represented by the headlines, is distant and unsympathetic.

Peel concludes with an analysis of the poem’s political significance.

By the end of the poem, we understand the predicament of the black man. Exploited by the landlord, politically oppressed by

those who think he's out "to ruin the government," physically restrained by the police and the judicial system, and denied his individuality by the press, he is saved only by his own sense of humor. The very title of the poem suggests his--and Hughes's--sense of humor. The tenant is singing a ballad to his oppressors, but this ballad is no love song. It portrays the oppressors, through their own voices, in an unflattering light: the landlord as cowardly and ridiculous, the police and press as dull and soulless. The tenant may lack political power, but he speaks with vitality, and no one can say he lacks dignity or the spirit to survive.