

"Salvation"

By Langston Hughes

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 moans 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 song swirled all around me in the little church. The whole congregation prayed for me alone, in a mighty wail of moans 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.

Comment [A1]: The essay begins with a stark contradiction. This is likely intended to entice the audience and provoke an inquiry into the nature of his "salvation."

Comment [A2]: This detail establishes expectation placed on narrator.

Comment [A3]: Hughes uses polysyndeton to "pile on" the aunt's proclamations. This also mimics the confused manner in which children hear and articulate lists.

Comment [A4]: Syntax change to emphasize the naivety of the youth, which is ushered by the punctuated excitement from the aunt in the previous sentences.

Comment [A5]: The child is likely taking what his aunt said literally. The juxtaposition of the visceral environmental observations that precede this statement only further underscores the likelihood that the child misunderstood his aunt.

Comment [A6]: Again, we have an experience that is devoid of the abstractions of a sermon. Instead, the narrator hears it as music.

Comment [A7]: The sermon is being portrayed as a contrive system of persuasion. It isn't likely happenstance that the song was evoked before the children were called forth. This is evidence of the adult narrator making a judgment that the child's persona wouldn't likely make.

Comment [A8]: Again, Hughes uses a syntactic shift from a longer sentence to a shorter one to emphasize the latter.

Comment [A9]: Hughes's description of the old people illustrates the stark contrast of the young "lambs" and the persistent elders. The imagery could be taken as either antithesis to the youth and/or as frightening.

Comment [A10]: The italicized emphasis of "see" leaves little doubt of the conundrum. The narrator took his aunt's description literally.

Comment [A11]: The irony of a child coming to God because he tires of sitting rather than because of a spiritual epiphany creates a humorous shift in the narrative. This use of irony also reinforces the audience's understanding of the narrator's desire to see Jesus. Even fatigue won't dissuade him from wanting to witness Jesus in the room.

Comment [A12]: The word "swirled" articulates the dizzying circumstance for the young narrator. The heat, pressure, and confusion have caused the narrator's sense of reality to become distorted.

Comment [A13]: Hughes uses antithesis here with "wail of moans" and "serenely" to create a contrast and build tension.

Comment [A14]: The parallelism of "nothing happened," as well as the repetition of "nothing" conveys the disappointment of the narrator's unrealized wish to see Jesus.

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 "Amens," all the new young lambs were blessed in the name of God. Then joyous singing filled the room.

That night, for the first 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 anymore, since he didn't come to help me.

Comment [A15]: Here, the narrator is called by name by the minister to pressure him to submit. This, as well as previous attempts, portray religious salvation of the young as insincere and manipulated.

Comment [A16]: Here the audience arrives at the beginning of the epiphany. If God is an all-powerful sentient being, how could he accept a lie? Westley mocks Jesus with his sinful pride and playful "knickerbockered and grinning" derision.

Comment [A17]: His indoctrinated sense of ethics is challenged by Westley's blasphemy. The narrator's belief system is a lie.

Comment [A18]: This short paragraph emphasizes the shift in the essay. The narrator no longer believes in religious salvation and punishment for sin. He no longer waits "serenely" for Jesus.

Comment [A19]: Here Hughes uses two metaphors that connect the elation in the room to water. The shouting is immense, as a sea is large. The rejoicing washed over him like powerful waves with enough force to "sweep the place." Perhaps the narrator is drowning in the hubbub that ironically follows an insincere salvation. Perhaps Hughes is mocking the ignorance of the elders and their lack of situational awareness.

Comment [A20]: They have all gained "salvation" though none have had a religious awakening.

Comment [A21]: This sentence, a sort of periodic sentence, builds tension as it develops. What did he do for the first time in his life? He cried. This change in disposition is alarming. While the narrator was troubled and annoyed in the previous sentences, he cries here. This is intended to invite the audience to consider the reasons for this change in behavior.

Comment [A22]: Repetition is used here to emphasize the change.

Comment [A23]: He is ashamed or doesn't want to clarify.

Comment [A24]: She assumes but makes no effort to investigate. Like the church proceedings before, the elders are portrayed as either naive or dismissive of a reality that conflicts with their romantically religious desires.

Comment [A25]: The irony of "see" is revisited here.

Comment [A26]: This ultimate sentence delivers the heft of the essay. Yes, the narrator was ashamed of his lying and deception. (This might be the audience's first rationale for his crying earlier in the essay), but his despair is rooted in something more profound; he lost his faith. Ironically, in a ritual that was intended to strengthen the "lambs" inclusion into the church, Christianity, and the elders' society, this child lost his faith in all of the above. Additionally, the choppy polysyndetic, cumulative sentence's syntax further builds the tension of the epiphany.