



## Early Autumn

Langston Hughes

When Bill was very young, they had been in love. Many nights they had spent walking, talking together. Then something not very important had come between them, and they didn't speak. Impulsively, she had married a man she thought she loved. Bill went away, bitter about women.

Yesterday, walking across Washington Square, she saw him for the first time in years.

"Bill Walker," she said.

He stopped. At first he did not recognize her, to him she looked so old.

"Mary! Where did you come from?"

Unconsciously, she lifted her face as though wanting a kiss, but he held out his hand. She took it.

"I live in New York now," she said.

"Oh" --smiling politely. Then a little frown came quickly between his eyes.

"Always wondered what happened to you, Bill."

"I'm a lawyer. Nice firm, way downtown."

"Married yet?"

"Sure. Two kids."

"Oh," she said.

A great many people went past them through the park. People they didn't know. It was late afternoon. Nearly sunset. Cold.

"And your husband?" he asked her.

"We have three children. I work in the bursar's office at Columbia."

"You're looking very. . ." (he wanted to say *old*) ". . .well," he said.

She understood. Under the trees in Washington Square, she found herself desperately reaching back into the past. She had been older than he then in Ohio. Now she was not young at all. Bill was still young.

"We live on Central Park West," she said. "Come and see us sometime."

"Sure," he replied. "You and your husband must have dinner with my family some night. Any night. Lucille and I'd love to have you."

The leaves fell slowly from the trees in the Square. Fell without wind. Autumn dusk. She felt a little sick.

"We'd love it," she answered.

"You ought to see my kids." He grinned.

Suddenly the lights came on up the whole length of Fifth Avenue, chains of misty brilliance in the blue air.

"There's my bus," she said.

He held out his hand, "Good-bye."

"When. . ." she wanted to say, but the bus was ready to pull off. The lights on the avenue blurred, twinkled, blurred. And she was afraid to open her mouth as she entered the bus. Afraid it would be impossible to utter a word.

Suddenly she shrieked very loudly, "Good-bye!" But the bus door had closed.

The bus started. People came between them outside, people crossing the street, people they didn't know. Space and people. She lost sight of Bill. Then she remembered she had forgotten to give him her address--or to ask him for his--or tell him that her youngest boy was named Bill, too.

## Stopping to Talk

### A Student Essay

In his short story "Early Autumn," Langston Hughes dramatizes the idea that hurried movement through life prevents people from forming or maintaining meaningful relationships. Hughes develops his theme of "walking" versus "talking" through such devices as setting, plot construction, and dialogue.

The story's setting continually reminds the reader that time is running out; it is urgent for people to stop and communicate before it's too late. The meeting between the two characters takes place on a busy walkway, where strangers hurry past one another. The season is autumn, the time is "late afternoon," the temperature is "cold." The end of the renewed connection between Mary and Bill coincides with the blurring of the streetlights. The chilly, dark setting suggests the coming of winter, of night, even of death.

In keeping with the setting, the plot is a series of lost chances for intimacy. When they were young and in love, Bill and Mary used to "walk. . . [and] talk. . . together," but that was years ago. The "something not very important. . . [came] between them, and they didn't speak." When she says Bill's name, Mary halts Bill's movement through the park, and for a short time, "Bill "Walker" stops walking. But when Mary hurries onto the bus, the renewed connection snaps. Moreover, even their brief meeting in the park is already a thing of the past, having taken place "yesterday."

Like their actions, the characters' words illustrate a reluctance to communicate openly. The dialogue consists of little more than platitudes: "I live in New York now. . . . We have three kids. . . . You and your husband must have dinner with my family some night." The narrator's telling comments about what remains unspoken ("he wanted to say. . .," "she wanted to say. . .") underscore Bill and Mary's separateness. Indeed, Mary fails to share the one piece of information that would have revealed her feelings for Bill walker--that her youngest son is also named Bill.

The theme of walking vs. Talking runs throughout "Early Autumn." "Space and people," Hughes writes, once again come between Bill and Mary, and, as in the past, they go their separate ways. Through the two characters, Hughes seems to be urging each of us to speak--to slow our steps long enough to make emotional contact.

+Thesis, title, and author is paragraph 1.

+Plan of development is clear

+Backs up thesis with textual evidence in form of summaries and quotes.

+Quotes are no longer than is necessary to support her points

+Ends essay by pointing out the relevance of the story's theme to reader's own life.  
(Gives us a "so what.")