

## Biography of Langston Hughes

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Langston Hughes is often remembered as a Harlem Renaissance poet, but he wrote much more than poetry. As the sixteen-volume *Collected Works of Langston Hughes* (2001–03) verifies, Hughes wrote novels, newspaper columns, essays, plays, short stories, histories, autobiographies, and children’s books in addition to his well-known verse. Moreover, while Hughes rose to international attention during the Harlem Renaissance, publishing his first two volumes of poetry during the 1920s, he continued to write and edit volumes of literature until his death in 1967. When he died, he left several projects to be completed, and subsequent volumes of his works and letters continue to be published. It is true that Hughes loved and is associated with Harlem, New York, where a section of East 127th Street is known as Langston Hughes Place in his honor. However, Hughes also traveled internationally and throughout the United States, and his travels significantly influenced his writing. Thus, Hughes was much more than a Harlem Renaissance poet.

James Langston Hughes was born February 1, 1902. His father, James Hughes, abandoned his mother, Carrie Langston Hughes, leaving young Hughes to become what his character Simple terms “a passed-around child.” Nevertheless, Hughes absorbed human and cultural lessons from all the places and people he encountered. As Carrie and Homer Clark, her second husband, searched for employment in various cities, young Hughes was left in the care of his maternal grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas. Hughes later lived in other midwestern cities, including Topeka, Kansas, and Lincoln, Illinois.

In libraries and in books, Hughes found the beauty, sufficiency, and stability that eluded him because of his frequent moves and financial marginality. He desired to communicate with others as did those authors he read and loved. Encouraged by teachers and classmates, he earned the title of class poet and wrote short stories while attending Central

High School in Cleveland, Ohio, where he learned to distinguish “reactionary” white schoolmates and neighbors from “decent” white folk.

In 1920, after graduating from high school, Hughes traveled to Mexico to live with his father. Caught in the conflict and hostility between his parents, Hughes exercised his remarkable gift for using writing to cope with internal anguish, transforming it into enduring literature. En route to Mexico, with his mother’s anger in his mind, Hughes wrote the brilliant poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” which would be published by the *Crisis* in 1921.

In Mexico, Hughes discovered new dimensions of racial and economic class distinctions. His personal appearance and proficiency in Spanish permitted him access to venues that enriched his cultural and personal awareness. Moreover, he discovered how a new language could change Americans’ perspectives about race. Hughes produced poems, short stories, and even a children’s play, “The Gold Piece,” in response to his experiences in Mexico.

After a year, Hughes left Mexico and enrolled in Columbia University, from which his money-focused father expected him to earn an engineering degree. Although neither the school nor the major satisfied Hughes, he did at last see Harlem. Uncertain about his next step but very certain that he would move on from Columbia, Hughes relinquished his father’s financial support and left the university in 1922, working a series of jobs that required physical labor. In 1923, he found work on a ship and began a period of travel that would greatly shape his later work.

Unlike many Harlem Renaissance writers who merely idealized Africa, Hughes actually visited several ports along the continent’s western coast. Poems and short stories captured Hughes’s impressions of the land and the people he met on the ship and in the ports. When he tired of life on the ship, he traveled to Paris and worked as a dishwasher in a cabaret, where he heard much jazz music. The work was hard, but the environment and the people provided him with rich material for his writing. He mailed some of his new poems and prose writings

to publications in the United States, and they were published while he was still living abroad. His reputation grew, even in his absence.

Weary of financial difficulties overseas, Hughes moved back to the United States, joining his mother in Washington, DC. He briefly worked as an assistant in the office of the noted historian Carter G. Woodson, but the prestige of his new employer did not override his aversion to the work he was asked to do. Complaining of too much eyestrain and too many detailed assignments, Hughes left Woodson and took a job in a restaurant while continuing to write poetry and prose. *Opportunity* magazine awarded him first prize in a poetry contest in 1925, and writer Carl Van Vechten successfully urged publisher Alfred A. Knopf to offer Hughes a book contract. Although *The Weary Blues* was already under contract with Knopf, Hughes posed for photos and made the news when he was “discovered” as the “busboy poet” by poet Vachel Lindsay at the Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, DC, later that year.

In 1926, the same year that Knopf published *The Weary Blues*, Hughes returned to university. Already recognized as a writer, Hughes enrolled in Pennsylvania’s Lincoln University, the oldest historically black college in the United States. His second volume of poetry, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, was published in 1927. During his matriculation at Lincoln, Hughes worked on his novel *Not without Laughter* (1930), majored in sociology, and joined the Omega Psi Phi fraternity. Hughes frequently traveled to New York City to enjoy theater, music, and the atmosphere of the period later known as the Harlem Renaissance. His education was financially supported by friends, and his literary endeavors were supported and monitored carefully by a wealthy but controlling patron, Charlotte Mason.

Having already collaborated with several young writers and artists to produce the first and only volume of the magazine *Fire!!*, Hughes aligned himself with the rebellious new generation of African Americans who took pride in the language, music, and behavior of common black folk. More conservative and better-educated black critics some-

times condemned Hughes, with one even calling him the “poet low-rate” of Harlem in a review of *Fine Clothes to the Jew*.

Hughes graduated from Lincoln University in 1929. The following year, he broke away from Mason, even though fellow writer Zora Neale Hurston and Howard University professor Alain Locke remained associated with her. Once again, Hughes refused to surrender his personal aesthetic and philosophy for the sake of financial support.

To promote his writing and gain some funds, Hughes heeded the advice of Mary McLeod Bethune—racial leader and founder of Bethune-Cookman College—and took his poetry to the people by touring the South, reading his work, and meeting his fans. He secured an award from the Rosenwald Foundation and sold his works as he traveled. Adoring fans welcomed the young, handsome, and engaging poet, and his audiences and readership grew. Hughes remained aware of political issues as he made his first real tour of the South, focusing in particular on the case of the Scottsboro Boys, a group of young black men accused of raping two white women in Alabama in 1931. Hughes visited the accused men and wrote poems, essays, and plays in response to their plight.

In 1932, Hughes joined a group of African Americans who accepted an invitation to work on a film project in the Soviet Union. The venture failed, but Hughes remained in the region, traveling and observing conditions. He was particularly impressed to see that in Soviet Asia, those with brown skin did not always face discrimination. Unlike many other American writers, who were drawn to purely theoretical concepts of socialism during the 1930s, Hughes appreciated behaviors and attitudes he actually observed in Eastern Europe. He celebrated the absence of Jim Crow segregation practices, the apparent absence of anti-Semitism, and the availability of education and medical care. He recorded impressions of his travels in many poems, in his *Chicago Defender* column, and in his second autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956). Before returning to the United States, he also visited China and Japan.

Turning his attention to other genres of literature, Hughes published his first volume of short stories, *The Ways of White Folks*, in 1934. His career as a playwright blossomed when his play *Mulatto* experienced a successful run on Broadway between 1935 and 1936. In addition, Hughes worked in Cleveland, Ohio, with the Karamu House, and in New York he established the Harlem Suitcase Theater. Guggenheim and Rosenwald Fellowships helped to finance and encourage his work in theater. Hughes also turned to journalism and autobiographical writing during this period. In 1937, he reported on the Spanish Civil War for the *Baltimore Afro-American*. He was encouraged by friends and supporters to tell his own life story, the first volume of which was published in 1940 as *The Big Sea*.

Although Hughes was not compelled to serve in the military when the United States entered World War II, he did offer his writing skills to promote nationalism, creating jingles to encourage Americans to buy war bonds. He had also begun writing weekly columns in the *Chicago Defender*. While these columns typically discussed books, food, and travels, they also sometimes urged readers to remain loyal to the United States and the Allied forces—in spite of persistent segregation and discrimination in civilian and military life. His fictional creation Jesse B. Semple, also known as Simple, gave Hughes another voice through which to express frustration about racism in a nation that alleged its advocacy of democracy. From occasional appearances in the *Chicago Defender*, Simple grew to become one of Hughes's most enduring and well-crafted creations. Simon and Schuster published *Simple Speaks His Mind*, the first book-length collection of Simple stories, in 1950.

Although the newspaper columns increased his audience, Hughes's greatest financial success resulted from a theatrical collaboration with Kurt Weill and Elmer Rice. Hughes helped to adapt Rice's play *Street Scene* into a musical, which opened on Broadway in 1947. Its success allowed Hughes to purchase his first and only home, a brownstone in his beloved Harlem.

Clearly, Hughes established himself as a citizen of the world, a creator of many genres of literature, and an artist whose success extended far beyond the Harlem Renaissance. Despite his reputation as a talented and respected American artist, which was underscored by an award granted to him by the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1945, Hughes became the subject of an investigation by Senator Joseph McCarthy's subcommittee on subversive activities in 1953. Due to his travels in the Soviet Union and association with known members of the Communist Party, Hughes became a target for those who questioned his loyalty to the United States. However, this negative attention did not end his career. Hughes went on to serve as an official US representative to the 1966 First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, and travel to other countries on behalf of the US State Department.

Hughes had been determined to make a living as a writer, but he had no idea how much writing he would have to do in order to succeed. In the last fifteen years of his life, he typically worked on multiple book projects and a few plays simultaneously. His correspondence with his close friend and collaborator Arna Bontemps, much of which is collected in *Arna Bontemps–Langston Hughes Letters, 1925–1967* (1980; ed. Charles H. Nichols), clearly reveals how frantically Hughes juggled his multiple assignments. Hughes produced an amazing variety of books, including edited anthologies and collaborations. Among his best-known works are his volumes of Simple stories, including *Simple Takes a Wife* (1953) and *Simple's Uncle Sam* (1965), and a musical play, *Simply Heavenly*, which ran on Broadway in 1957. One of his most innovative poetic volumes, *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*, was published in 1961, the year Hughes was inducted into the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

Hughes also published a series of histories for young readers, including *Famous American Negroes* and *The First Book of Rhythms* in 1954 and *The First Book of Jazz* and *Famous Negro Music Makers* in 1955. Hughes published the second volume of his autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*, in 1956. He published *Fight for Freedom*, the

history of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), in 1962.

His numerous collections include two volumes of short stories, *Laughing to Keep from Crying* (1952) and *Something in Common* (1963); *Selected Poems* (1957), from which he omitted his controversial poems about socialism; and a volume that combines several genres, *The Langston Hughes Reader* (1958).

Hughes worked on a number of collaborations with various writers, editors, and artists in the last fifteen years of his life. With photographer Roy De Carava, he published *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* in 1955, co-editing *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America* with Milton Meltzer the following year. Sometimes referred to as a dean of literature, Hughes also made significant contributions as an editor. In assembling *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* (1967), he recognized the talent of Alice Walker, publishing her first short story, "To Hell with Dying." He also edited two volumes of literature from Africa.

After two weeks of treatment at the New York Polyclinic Hospital, Hughes died on May 22, 1967, from complications related to prostate cancer. He retained his own brand of humor to the very end, leaving instructions stipulating that Duke Ellington's "Do Nothing Till You Hear from Me" be played at his memorial service.

Several books and collaborations by Hughes were published posthumously. His final volume of poetry, *The Panther and the Lash* (1967), was already complete at the time of his death. Several collaborations were also under way at the time, including a pictorial study of blacks in entertainment, *Black Magic* (1967; with Meltzer), and a revised edition of *The Poetry of the Negro 1746–1970* (1970; with Bontemps).

Scholars of Hughes have continued to study and edit collections of his work. Faith Berry brings to light many of the socialist works Hughes suppressed after his subpoena to appear before Senator McCarthy in *Good Morning Revolution* (1973). *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1994), edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, has eclipsed Hughes's own *Selected Poems. The Return of Simple* (1994),

edited by Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper, introduces readers to the stories omitted from *The Best of Simple* and even includes some stories never before printed in books. In *Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender* (1995), Christopher C. De Santis restores to readers many of the nonfiction columns Hughes wrote during his lengthy career as a newspaper columnist.

The centennial of Hughes's birth in 2002 inspired scholarly programs and musical celebrations throughout the United States as well as a commemorative stamp issued by the US Postal Service. Forty years after his death, in 2007, *Foreign Literature Studies* held an international symposium on Hughes at Central China Normal University in Wuhan, China. Representatives of the Langston Hughes Society, organized in 1981, joined scholars from China and other nations to remember the works of Langston Hughes—a citizen of the world, a writer of many genres, and an individual whose works continue to be read and enjoyed.



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