Meet Langston Hughes



When Langston Hughes was nineteen, his father offered to send him to college in Europe so Hughes could escape from the racism and segregation that affected every part of American life. Hughes refused, however, explaining, "More than Paris, or the Shakespeare country, or Berlin, or the Alps, I wanted to see Harlem, the greatest Negro city in the world." Hughes spent the rest of his life celebrating Harlem and African American life.

Born in Joplin, Missouri, Hughes came from a family of abolitionists. His grandfather, James Mercer, was the first African American elected to public office. Despite having a wealthy father, Hughes knew what it meant to live in poverty. By the age of twelve, he had already lived in six different cities because his divorced mother was always moving around looking for work. He also lived for a time with his grandmother, who told him stories about heroic ancestors who had fought slavery and racism. She helped instill in Hughes a lasting sense of pride in his heritage and culture.

Hughes began writing poetry in high school. He attended Columbia University for a year but found the school to be too large and impersonal. Instead he went to live in his beloved Harlem, where he had a hard time finding a job. Finally he took a job as a merchant sailor, traveling to Africa and Europe. When he returned to the United States he continued writing poetry. While working as a hotel busboy in Washington, Hughes gained the attention of poet Vachel Lindsay by leaving three poems by his plate. Lindsay later read these peoms at a recital. Hughes eventually earned a college degree from Lincoln University. In 1926 his first book, *The Weary Blues*, was published.

Throughout his life Hughes was a "poet of the people" who spent much time traveling across the country to read his poetry. He integrated the rhythms of blues and jazz music in his writings and used the language of the people he encountered. Hughes saw beauty in the wisdom, humor, and strength of the people he portrayed.

Although best known as a poet, Hughes also wrote fiction, drama, popular songs, and satirical sketches about an uneducated but perceptive character named Simple. In addition, he worked on anthologies and translations and helped the careers of many younger writers.

"It is the duty of the younger Negro artist . . . to change through the force of his art that old whispering 'I want to be white' to 'why should I want to be white? I am a Negro—and beautiful!'"

"I didn't know the upper-class Negroes well enough to write much about them. I knew only the people I had grown up with, and they weren't people whose shoes were always shined, who had been to Harvard, or who had heard of Bach. But they seemed to me good people, too."

—Hughes

"Hughes . . . was unashamedly black at a time when blackness was démodé [not fashionable], and he didn't go much beyond one of his earliest themes, black *is* beautiful."

—Lindsay Patterson

Langston Hughes was born in 1902 and died in 1967.