

Langston Hughes

Langston Hughes was one of the most original and versatile of twentieth-century black writers. Born in Joplin, Missouri, to James Nathaniel and Carrie Mercer Langston Hug[h]es, he was reared for a time by his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas after his parents' divorce. Influenced by the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Carl Sandburg, he began writing creatively while still a boy. After his graduation from high school in Cleveland he spent fifteen months in Mexico with his father; upon his return to the United States in 1921, Hughes spent a year at Columbia University. Disillusioned with formal education, in 1923 he joined the crew of the SS *Malone* bound for Africa, where the ship visited thirty-odd ports. Before returning to New York, Hughes lived in Paris, Venice, and Genoa



Despite the celebrated story of Hughes's being "discovered" by the white poet Vachel Lindsay while working as a hotel busboy in 1925, by that point Hughes had already established himself as a bright young star of the New Negro Renaissance. One of his most famous and innovative poems, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (dedicated to W. E. B. Du Bois), appeared in the *Crisis* of 1921; and in 1923, the New York's *Amsterdam News* carried his "The Weary Blues." Two years later [actually three], his first collection, also entitled *The Weary Blues*, was published.

The most important stage in Langston Hughes's development as a writer was his discovery of New York, of Harlem, of the cultural life and literary circle of the "New Negro" writers: Countee Cullen, Arna Bontemps, Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Eric Walrond and others. The black revue *Shuffle Along* was on Broadway, and Harlem was the center of a thriving theater and the new music--jazz. Hughes steeped himself in the language, music, and feeling of the common people of Harlem. Proud of his folk heritage, Hughes made the spirituals, blues, and jazz the bases of his poetic expression. Hughes wrote, he contended, "to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America." As his friends said of him, "No one enjoyed being a Negro as much as Langston Hughes." He portrayed the humor, wit, endurance, and faith of his people with extraordinary skill. Subjected to discrimination and segregation, he remained steadfast in his devotion to human rights. His well-known defense of black writers was typical: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark skinned selves without fear or shame . . ." [The Nation 1926]

The versatility of Langston Hughes is evident in his capacity to create in every literary genre--poetry, fiction, drama, essay, and history. He was also the most prolific of black writers; more than 12 volumes of his poetry appeared in his lifetime. Hughes won several prizes, awards, and fellowships, and was in constant demand for readings and lectures throughout the world. His fiction is equally distinguished. In addition to his fine

coming-of-age novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930), Langston Hughes created the character of Jesse B. Simple, a lively embodiment of urban black life, whose folk wit and wisdom allowed Hughes to undermine the bourgeois pretensions of our society while pointing out the hypocritical nature of American racism. Like Whitman, Hughes enhances our love of humanity, our vision of the just society with a spiritual transcendence and ever-widening horizons of joy and hope. In its spontaneity and race pride, his poetry found a response among poets of Africa and the Caribbean, and in his own country Hughes served as both an inspiration and a mentor for the younger black writers who came of age in the 1960s. With his rich poetic voice, nurturing generosity, warm humor, and abiding love of black people, Langston Hughes was one of the dominant voices in American literature of this century and perhaps the single most influential black poet.

A Dream Deferred

What happens to a
dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten
meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
-
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?