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[Langston Hughes. Hughes \(1902–1967\) is widely... in Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society](#)

Summary Article: **Hughes, Langston (1902–1967)**

From *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice*

James Langston Hughes was an outstanding African American poet who relentlessly fought against racial segregation and significantly contributed to strengthening black consciousness and racial pride among the black people in America, particularly through the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902. His parents separated shortly after his birth, his father eventually moving to Mexico, ostensibly driven by the contempt he had developed for African Americans whom he saw as having accepted their deprived state in the racially segregated America. Hughes spent his early childhood with his maternal grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas. It was an altogether lonely and unhappy life. But the caring and inspiring nature of his grandmother, a political activist in her own right, and the love he cultivated for books and reading, made it bearable. After 1914, he lived with his mother in Lincoln, Illinois, and then Cleveland, Ohio. Upon graduation from high school in 1919, he spent a year with his father in Mexico.

Hughes began writing poetry early. In high school in Cleveland, where he was elected class poet, qualified for the honor roll, and edited the school yearbook, he read and developed interest in the poetry of Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg. These poets, as well as black poets Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Claude McKay, were to exert a great influence on his verse. One of his most memorable and widely anthologized poems, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” composed soon after he completed school and dedicated to W. E. B. Du Bois, was met with acclaim and was eventually published in *The Crisis*, the organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Like the great rivers of the world, black people’s culture will endure and deepen because of the strength of the black soul and imagination, the poem assures.

While in Mexico, Hughes learned German and Spanish, and was taught important lessons in the problematic manifestations of race, class, and ethnicity. He concentrated on writing and saw his poems appear regularly in *The Crisis* and other journals. In 1921, Hughes joined Columbia University to study engineering. Dissatisfied with the course, which he had taken on his father’s demand, he left after a year. By that time, he had resolved to live as a writer.

Soon after, he joined the merchant marines and traveled widely to Africa, Italy, and France as a cook’s helper and doing other menial jobs. While in France, he also worked briefly in a Paris nightclub. It was while at the club that he met Dr. Alain Locke, perceived as the standard-bearer and chief black proponent of the Harlem Renaissance, who recognized his talent and decided to include some of his poems in his influential anthology of African American literature, *The New Negro* of 1924.

Hughes returned to the United States in late 1924 and, among other jobs, worked as a busboy in a Washington, D.C., hotel restaurant. There, another momentous meeting took place, this time with the renowned white poet Vachel Lindsay. Lindsay was impressed by his poems and included some of them in a public reading night. The event was a great success for Hughes as the local press carried headlines of the discovery of a busboy poet.

Between 1926 and 1929, Hughes studied for a bachelor's degree at Lincoln University, Pennsylvania. In 1943, the same university awarded him a doctorate in literature.

With the poetry collections, *The Weary Blues* of 1926 and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* of 1927, Hughes launched his multitalented career to become one of the most influential figures in African American literature and culture. His strength was in the vividness with which he captured the stories of his people in their culture, music, and language.

Hughes soon rose as a major figure of the Harlem Renaissance, a movement that flourished during the 1920s in the black Harlem district of New York. It raised and interrogated such issues as race, the legacy of the folk, the promise of modern life for African Americans, and the potential of art in this life, as well as the building of a racially free American nation. In his 1926 essay "The Negro and the Racial Mountain," he summed up the spirit of creative independence and boldness espoused and lived by the artists of the Harlem Renaissance. It became the movement's manifesto.

Hughes uniquely incorporated black American jazz, black spirituals, blues, colloquial speech, and folkways into his poetry and thus became the unofficial poet laureate of Harlem and the black race generally. Through his authentic handling of black life and his incisive treatment of matters of race relations in his works, he significantly contributed to the fortifying of black consciousness and racial pride in black people, which became Harlem Renaissance's resounding legacy to the civil rights movement of the 1950s through the 1970s.

On graduation from Lincoln University, Hughes moved to New York and continued to write, supported by grants from a white patron. But he was quick to give up on this relationship, determined to seek his own creative goals independently. In 1930 he completed and published his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, a near autobiographical work about a black protagonist's arduous journey in search of material fulfillment for his deprived family. The book won the Hamon Gold Award for Literature.

Hughes embarked on an extensive reading tour of the South in 1931, seeking to arouse the consciousness of both blacks and whites in matters of racial relations. Though this enterprise was generally successful, his poetry aroused controversies on account of what some blacks saw as his degrading portrayal of black life. Reading at the University of North Carolina, on the other hand, provoked conservative whites, an occurrence that ruled out his further appearances on white campuses. Still, Hughes was not deterred and continued in his endeavor to stir people's consciences to the suffering of black folk and the genteel pretences of the white fraternity. While on this tour, he also visited and helped highlight the plight of the Scottsboro Boys in Alabama, who had been accused of raping a white woman.

Having fully established his writing career, Hughes set on traveling widely. He toured Cuba, the Soviet Union, China, and Japan. He spent a year in the Soviet Union (1932–1933) where he wrote on Asia and race relations for Moscow journals. His most radical verse belongs to this period. The Soviet way of life impressed him and he developed an interest in communism. He returned to America in 1933 and his first volume of short stories, *The Ways of White Folks*, appeared a year later.

In this collection, Hughes satirically critiques white racism in its self-deception and various manifestations. The story, "The Blues I Am Singing," a classic of the Harlem Renaissance, asks such important questions as whom African American art belongs to, and to what it owes its allegiance, questions that occupied many African American authors in the 1930s as they reflected over the

withering away of the Harlem Renaissance and its achievements. Hughes forcefully asserts his view that African American art had as its object and aim enhancing the cause of black people and their rich expressive traditions.

Hughes's play *Mulatto*, which focuses on the subject of miscegenation and parental rejection, opened on Broadway in 1935. It was followed by the comedy *Little Ham* of 1936 and the historical drama, *Emperor of Haiti* of 1936. In 1937 he toured Europe and then returned to the United States to found the Harlem Suitcase Theatre, the Negro Art Theatre in Los Angeles, and Skyloft Players in Chicago. In 1949 Hughes turned a play he had written on the Haitian Revolution, *Troubled Island*, into the libretto for an opera by the prominent black composer William Grant Still. He also collaborated on various scripts for films and musicals.

World War II saw Hughes mellow in his political views. In his weekly columns in the *Chicago Defender*, he called on African Americans to support the United States in the war, but also urged the government to treat all its citizens equally. In his two collections of verse during this period, *Shakespeare in Harlem* of 1942 and *Jim Crow's Last Stand* of 1943, he strongly attacked racial segregation. After the war, his finest literary achievement was the collection *Montage of a Dream Deferred* of 1951, verse that captured the growing desperation among the black urban communities of the North.

One of the most enduring legacies of Hughes to African American fiction is the creation of the character Jesse B. Semple (better known as "Simple"). He first appeared in 1942 in a series of newspaper sketches for the *Chicago Defender* and continued his literary life for 20 years. Semple is portrayed as a satirically comic observer and commentator on various American issues, particularly those related to racial relations. Starting with *Simple Speaks His Mind* in 1950, Hughes bitingly interrogates the glaring injustices of white racism and segregation.

On the music stage, Hughes met several successes, particularly in the production with Kurt Weill and Elmer Rice of *Street Scene* of 1947, seen as a breakthrough in the development of American opera. Widely acclaimed musicals included *Simply Heavenly*, the Christmas show *Black Nativity*, and *Jericho-Jim Crow*, inspired by the civil rights movement. The highly ambitious and experimental book-length poem, *Ask Your Mama*, though less popular, is remarkable for its recourse to black culture and music.

Hughes also wrote a commissioned history of NAACP, *Fight for Freedom*, and edited *An African Treasury, Poems from Black Africa, Ethiopia and Other Countries*, and *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers*.

Hughes was awarded the Spingarn Medal for distinguished achievements by an African American by the NAACP in 1960, and was inducted into the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1961. He was hailed in 1966 as a historic artistic figure at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. However, by this time, Hughes found himself increasingly rejected by radical black militants of America, who saw him as not committed enough. *The Panther and the Lash*, a verse volume that mainly focuses on civil rights, was Hughes's last book.

Politically, Hughes oscillated between the left and the center. He engaged in anti-racial protests in California, and submitted a speech to the Leftist First American Writers' Conference in New York City in 1935. In 1940, he joined 300 other writers of the American Peace Mobilization in signing an anti-World War II statement in *New Masses* sponsored by the League of American writers. He was also involved in communist-leaning organizations such as the John Reed Clubs and the League of Struggle

for Negro Rights. However, he saw himself as an artist first and foremost and never fully participated in the radical activities of these organizations. In 1953, he was summoned to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee about his political activities. He protested of never having been a communist and having severed leftist links. Through this denial, he lost the respect of some activists who saw him as having taken a stand against the Communist Party of America and having betrayed the African American cause.

Hughes died in 1967 from prostate cancer. His works have continued to be reissued after his death. At his 89th birth anniversary, his cremated remains were interred in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. He was also commemorated in the American Poets' Corner at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, joining other American writers of high repute who sought the best for the human race in their works.

*See also*

Anti-Lynching Movement; Anti-Racist Teaching; Black Power; Civil Rights Movement; Communism; Communist Party USA; Du Bois, W. E. B.; Literature and Activism; Locke, Alain

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