

## LANGSTON HUGHES AND HIS POETRY

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### ANNOTATION

*The article offers a comprehensive overview of Langston Hughes's life and career, tracing his journey from his humble beginnings in Joplin, Missouri, to his pivotal role in the Harlem Renaissance and beyond. Born into a fractured family, Hughes found solace in literature and poetry, which became the cornerstone of his identity and artistic expression. Through his seminal works like "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "The Weary Blues," Hughes captured the essence of African American experiences, earning him acclaim as the "Poet Laureate of Harlem." His exploration of jazz poetry, infused with rhythms and themes reflective of Black life, further solidified his status as a literary pioneer. Despite facing racial barriers at Columbia University, Hughes thrived within the vibrant cultural milieu of Harlem, forging connections and contributing to the burgeoning artistic movement. His dedication to portraying the struggles and triumphs of ordinary Black Americans, as evidenced in works like "Fine Clothes to the Jew," underscored his commitment to authenticity and representation. Through his bold declarations in essays such as "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes advocated for artistic autonomy and self-affirmation within the Black community, leaving an indelible mark on American literature and cultural discourse.*

**Key words:** *Early life, Poems, Books, Theatrical career*

### INTRODUCTION

Hughes was born on February 1, 1902, possibly in 1901, in Joplin, Missouri, to James and Caroline Hughes. His parents split when he was young, with his father moving to Mexico and his mother, Caroline (nee Langston), seeking employment elsewhere. He was primarily raised by his grandmother, Mary Langston, in Lawrence, Kansas, until her passing when he was about 12. Afterwards, he went to live with his mother and stepfather in Illinois before settling in Cleveland. In his autobiographical work "The Big Sea," Hughes described how reading became his

solace during lonely times, shaping his worldview. He began exploring poetry in high school in Ohio, focusing on themes related to everyday people and the African American experience, drawing inspiration from writers like Carl Sandburg, Walt Whitman, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. After graduating in 1920, he spent a year in Mexico with his father, during which time he penned "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," a poem that gained attention when it was published in *The Crisis* magazine by the NAACP. This poem, reflecting on the timeless essence of rivers and the deepening of his own soul, marked the beginning of Hughes's literary acclaim.

After his return from Mexico, Hughes spent a year studying at Columbia University in New York City, though he found the experience unpleasant due to racism. Despite this, he became deeply involved in the burgeoning cultural scene of Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance. Over the following years, Hughes held various jobs such as cook, elevator operator, and laundry worker. He also worked as a steward on a ship, traveling to Africa and Europe, and resided in Paris, where he mingled with the expatriate artist community. Upon returning to America, he settled in Washington, D.C., where, while working as a busboy, he shared his poetry with the esteemed poet Vachel Lindsay, known as the pioneer of modern singing poetry, who helped Hughes establish connections in the literary world. Hughes's debut poetry collection, "The Weary Blues," was published in 1926, and he later earned a scholarship to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, graduating in 1929. Soon after, he published his first novel, "Not Without Laughter," which received the Harmon Gold Medal for literature.

Known as the "Poet Laureate of Harlem," Hughes is celebrated as the originator of jazz poetry, a literary style that mirrors the rhythms and themes of jazz music. Describing jazz as a fundamental expression of African American life, he likened it to the persistent beat of a tom-tom drum within the Black soul, symbolizing resistance against the challenges of a predominantly white society. In his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" from 1926, Hughes articulated this perspective. His writing consistently centered on the lives of ordinary Black Americans, as exemplified in his 1927 piece "Fine Clothes to the Jew," which depicted the struggles of workers and individuals striving to make ends meet. Unabashedly, Hughes addressed his own experiences and observations, asserting in the same essay that contemporary Black artists aimed to authentically express their identities without fear or shame, regardless of white approval. This bold declaration underscores his commitment to representing the beauty and complexity of Black existence.

Continually on the move, Hughes extensively traveled throughout the South, documenting racial injustices, and even ventured to the Soviet Union in the 1930s, displaying an interest in communism, a stance that led to his appearance before

Congress during the McCarthy hearings in 1953. In 1930, Hughes collaborated with Zora Neale Hurston on "Mule Bone," his inaugural play, marking the beginning of a prolific theatrical career. His play "Mulatto: A Tragedy of the Deep South," addressing race issues, held the distinction of being Broadway's lengthiest play authored by a Black writer until Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" premiered in 1958, named after Hughes' poem "Harlem." Hughes also penned the lyrics for the 1947 Broadway musical "Street Scene" and took up residence in a Harlem brownstone, actively engaging in the theater scene by co-founding the New York Suitcase Theater and similar troupes in Los Angeles and Chicago. Despite racism hindering his efforts in Hollywood, Hughes contributed as a newspaper war correspondent during the Spanish Civil War in 1937 and wrote a column for the Chicago Defender from 1942 to 1962, focusing on topics such as Jim Crow laws, segregation, and the experiences of Black Americans during World War II. His column often featured the character Jesse B. Semple, also known as Simple. In the 1950s and '60s, Hughes expanded his literary repertoire with the "First Book" series of children's books, highlighting Black culture and achievements, such as "The First Book of Negroes" (1952), "The First Book of Jazz" (1955), and "The Book of Negro Folklore" (1958), which included stories like "Thank You, Ma'am," illustrating lessons of trust and respect.

Hughes passed away in New York on May 22, 1967, at 65, due to complications from prostate cancer surgery. His ashes rest at Harlem's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. His Harlem residence received recognition as a New York landmark in 1981 and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places a year later. A line from his 1926 poem "I, too" – "I, too, am America" – is inscribed on the wall of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.

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