



## Langston Hughes

**Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was an American poet, social activist, playwright, and columnist who gained prominence during his time living in Harlem, New York.**

### ***Early Life***

- Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri in 1902, and grew up mainly in Lawrence, Kansas.
- Hughes' parents, James Hughes and Carrie Langston, separated soon after his birth and his father moved to Mexico. The Langston family name was made famous by his grandfather Charles and Charles' brother John, two of the most prominent African-American abolitionists during the mid to late 1800s.
- While Hughes's mother moved around during his youth, Hughes was raised in Kansas by his maternal grandmother, Mary, until she died in his early teens. From that point, he went to live with his mother, and they moved to several cities before eventually settling in Cleveland, Ohio.
  - Through the black American oral tradition and drawing from the activist experiences of her generation, Mary Langston instilled in her grandson a lasting sense of racial pride.
  - During high school in Cleveland, Hughes' writing talent was recognized by his high school teachers and classmates. Hughes had his first pieces of verse published in the Central High *Monthly*, a sophisticated school magazine. Soon he was on the staff of the *Monthly*, and publishing in the magazine regularly.
- Hughes graduated from high school in 1920 and spent the following year in Mexico with his father. Around this time, Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was published in 'The Crisis' magazine (created by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People NAACP) and was highly praised.

### ***Enrollment at Columbia University and Formative Years***

- In 1921 Langston Hughes enrolled at Columbia University in engineering—a compromise he reached with his father for his tuition to be paid for.
  - During this time, Hughes became immersed in a growing, unique African-American cultural movement in the neighbourhood of Harlem, New York, known as the Harlem Renaissance.
- Hughes dropped out of Columbia in 1922 because of the racial prejudice he experienced there.
  - Hughes quickly became an integral part of the arts scene in Harlem, so much so that in many ways he defined the spirit of the age, from a literary point of view. *The Big Sea*, the first volume of his autobiography, provides such a crucial first-person account of the era and its key players that much of what we know about the *Harlem Renaissance* we know from Langston Hughes's point of view.
- Hughes began regularly publishing his work in 'The Crisis' and *Opportunity* magazines, and in doing so, he got to know other writers of the time.
  - When his poem "The Weary Blues" won first prize in the poetry section of the 1925 *Opportunity* magazine literary contest, Hughes's literary career was launched. His first volume of poetry, also titled *The Weary Blues*, appeared in 1926.
- At this point in Langston Hughes's evolution as a poet, he began to use the rhythm of African American music, particularly blues and jazz. This set his poetry apart from that of other writers, and it allowed him to experiment with a very rhythmic free verse.

## ***1926: Langston Hughes enrolls in Lincoln University in Pennsylvania***

- Langston Hughes enrolled in the historically black Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1926. He was supported by a patron of the arts, a wealthy white woman in her seventies named Charlotte Osgood Mason.
  - Mason directed Hughes's literary career, convincing him to write his debut novel *Not Without Laughter*, which was published in 1930. The protagonist of the story is a boy named Sandy, whose family must deal with a variety of struggles due to their race and class, and having to relate to one another.
    - Hughes and Mason had a falling out shortly after *Not Without Laughter* was published, and their relationship came to an end. Hughes sank into a period of intense personal unhappiness and disillusionment.
- After Hughes earned a B.A. degree from Lincoln University in 1929.

## ***Post 1930, WWII, and beyond***

- Following the publishing of *Not Without Laughter*, Hughes began to develop his interest in socialism. In 1932 he sailed to the Soviet Union with a group of young African Americans, but never considered himself a communist—he preferred the ideals of socialism much more than he did segregated America.
- Later in the 1930s, Hughes's primary writing was for the theatre. His drama about mixed-race relationships and the South - "Mulatto" - became the longest running Broadway play written by an African American until Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" (1958).
- In 1942, during World War II, Hughes began writing a column for the African American newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*.
  - **In 1943 he introduced the character of Jesse B. Semple, or Simple, to his readers. *This fictional everyman, while humorous, also allowed Hughes to discuss very serious racial issues. The Simple columns were very popular-- they ran for twenty years and were collected in several books.***
- Money was a nagging concern for Hughes throughout his life. While he managed to support himself as a writer, he was never financially secure. However, in 1947 through his work writing the lyrics for the Broadway musical "Street Scene," Hughes was able to earn enough money to purchase a house in Harlem, which had been his dream.

## ***Legacy & Death***

- Langston Hughes was deemed the "Poet Laureate of the Negro Race" in his later years, a title he encouraged. Hughes meant to represent the race in his writing and he was, perhaps, the most original of all African American poets. On May 22, 1967 Langston Hughes died after complications from abdominal surgery to remove a tumor. Hughes' funeral, like his poetry, was all blues and jazz: Very little was said by way of eulogy, but the jazz and the blues being played at the funeral were 'hot', and the final tribute to this writer so influenced by African American musical forms was fitting.

## ***Famous Quotes***

- In his 1940 autobiography *The Big Sea* he wrote: "I was unhappy for a long time, and very lonesome, living with my grandmother. Then it was that books began to happen to me, and I began to believe in nothing but books and the wonderful world in books — where if people suffered, they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables, as we did in Kansas.
- "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too."