

Hughes, (James Mercer) Langston



Langston Hughes,
photograph by Jack Delano,
1942

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(b. Feb. 1, 1902, Joplin, Mo., U.S.--d. May 22, 1967, New York City), black poet and writer who became, through numerous translations, one of the foremost interpreters to the world of the black experience in the United States. Hughes's parents separated soon after his birth, and young Hughes was raised by his mother and grandmother. After his grandmother's death, he and his mother moved to half a dozen cities before reaching Cleveland, where they settled. His poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," written the summer after his graduation from high school in Cleveland, was published in *Crisis* (1921) and brought him considerable attention.

After attending Columbia University (1921-22), he explored Harlem, forming a permanent attachment to what he called the "great dark city." He worked as a steward on a freighter bound for Africa. Back from seafaring and sojourning in Europe, he won an *Opportunity* magazine poetry prize in 1925. He received the Witter Bynner Undergraduate Poetry Award in 1926.

While working as a busboy in a hotel in Washington, D.C., Hughes put three of his own poems beside the plate of Vachel Lindsay in the dining room. The next day, newspapers around the country reported that Lindsay had discovered a Negro busboy poet. A scholarship to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania followed, and before Hughes received his degree in 1929, his first two books had been published.

The Weary Blues (1926) was warmly received. *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) was criticized harshly for its title and for its frankness, but Hughes himself felt it represented a step forward. A few months after graduation *Not Without Laughter* (1930), his first prose work, had a cordial reception. In the '30s his poetry became preoccupied with political militancy; he travelled widely in the Soviet Union, Haiti, and Japan and served as a newspaper correspondent (1937) in the Spanish Civil War. He published a collection of short stories, *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), and *The Big Sea* (1940), his autobiography up to the age of 28.

Hughes wrote *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America* (1956), and the anthologies *The Poetry of the Negro* (1949) and *The Book of Negro Folklore* (1958; with [Arna Bontemps](#)). He also wrote numerous works for the stage, including the lyrics for *Street Scene*, an opera with music by Kurt Weill. A posthumous book of poems, *The Panther and the Lash* (1967), reflected the black anger and militancy of the 1960s. Hughes translated the poetry of Federico García Lorca and Gabriela Mistral. He was also widely known for his comic character Jesse B. Semple, familiarly called Simple, who appeared in Hughes's columns in the *Chicago Defender* and the *New York Post* and later in book form and on the stage. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, appeared in 1994.

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