Bloom's Literature

Hughes Langston

One of the most active, most published, and most beloved poets of the Harlem Renaissance. In addition to his collections of poems, short stories, and novels, Hughes was a journalist, historian, essayist, translator, playwright, lyricist, founder of a theater group, and editor. He published frequently in the leading literary and race journals of his time. Identified in 1934 as one of America's most intriguing socially conscious individuals, Hughes also won prestigious prizes, such as the Guggenheim Fellowship and the Spingarn Medal. He was a literary and cultural ambassador whose travels and lectures heightened awareness of the diversity, talent, and depth of the African-American literary tradition.

He was born James Mercer Langston Hughes in Joplin, Missouri. His parents were James Nathaniel Hughes of Charlestown, Indiana, and Caroline [Carrie] Mercer Langston Hughes of Lawrence, Kansas. Hughes's racially mixed ancestry had especially powerful links to American antebellum and Civil War history. His paternal grandfather was a Civil War soldier, his maternal great-grandfather Ralph Quarles was a white Virginia Revolutionary War captain, and his maternal great-uncle was John Mercer Langston, the first elected African American from Virginia to serve in the House of Representatives.

His father, who worked in the office of a mining company in Joplin, moved out of the family home. He supported the family financially throughout his travels, which included a sojourn in Cuba and a longtime residence in Mexico. When Hughes did see his father there in 1908, an earthquake rocked Mexico City. James Hughes, who eventually settled in Toluca, Mexico, became a prosperous landlord, general manager of a power company, and also was a member of the Mexican bar.

Hughes lived primarily with his mother and maternal grandmother in the years following his father's departure. It was his grandmother Mary Langston, a stern woman of Cherokee heritage, who first immersed Hughes in stories of African-American history. Following her death in 1915, family friends whom he referred to as Aunt and Uncle Reed took in Hughes. Hughes's residence with the Reeds exposed him to Christianity and gave him ample opportunity to develop his faith. He resisted, and throughout his life he considered organized religion a lost cause and never joined a church. Just before his 14th birthday, Hughes left the Reeds and went to live with his newly remarried mother, her husband Homer Clark, and Clark's infant son Gwyn, the brother whom Hughes called Kit. In the fall of 1916, Hughes began high school in Cleveland, the city in which Homer Clark had found work as a building caretaker and janitor.

Hughes completed high school in Cleveland. His four years of study had been enriched by his immersion in books and in artistic and dramatic activities at the Neighborhood Association, a local settlement house in Cleveland run by Rowena and Russell Jelliffe. Hughes was an avid reader whose tastes ranged from the works of novelist Theodore Dreiser and the poets Carl Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay to philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Following his graduation from Central High School in 1920, he accepted his father's invitation to return to Mexico. Despite his mother's protests, Hughes reunited with his father. During his time in Mexico, he taught English at a local girls' school and business college. He did not follow his father's suggestions that he study engineering in Europe and return to Mexico. Instead, he returned to New York City to begin classes at Columbia University. Hughes, who boarded at the YMCA on West 135th Street before overcoming Columbia University prejudice that threatened to deny him a dormitory room, began to explore the vibrant world of Harlem. While Harlem was a thriving and inspiring place for Hughes, Columbia University was not. Despite his best efforts, Hughes was put off by the racism of fellow students on the staff of the student newspaper, felt alienated from many of his classmates, and was bored by his classes. He left after his first year. In the years before he resumed his formal education, Hughes worked as a florist delivery boy, joined the crew of the Africa-bound SS Malone as a mess boy, was the personal assistant to historian Carter G. Woodson, and was employed as an office helper in the offices of Woodson's Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Hughes began his studies at Lincoln University, the first college established in the North for African-American men, in the spring of 1926. Despite the prospect of studying at Harvard University, at the urging of Waring Cuney and suggestions from Alain Locke, Hughes chose Lincoln and graduated in 1929. Amy Spingarn, a dedicated sponsor of African-American arts and the namesake of one of the first literary contests in which Hughes would win awards, offered to finance his education.
Hughes never married. Scholars continue to debate whether or not the writer, who moved in openly gay circles, was a homosexual. There is no confirmation of Hughes's sexual orientation. Biographers such as Arnold Rampersad have profiled Hughes as a man without a significant sexual identity. Other critics cite contemporary evidence that suggests that the intensely private Hughes was gay. For instance, Hughes's close friend Arna Bontemps once remarked that his friend "never betrayed the mingling or posturing offensive to the straight world." Other Harlem Renaissance figures who were identified as homosexual, such as Countee Cullen and Alain Locke, tried in vain to develop an intimate relationship with Hughes.

Hughes's promise as a writer and his demonstrated penchant for social influence emerged at an early age. At age 13 he was elected class poet; by his senior year of high school, he was editor of the class yearbook. One major triumph that emerged from his otherwise frustrating time as a Columbia student was his opportunity to meet Jessie Fauset, literary editor of *The Crisis*, and to benefit from the efforts on his behalf made by Augustus Granville Dill, the magazine's business manager.

Hughes, who gave a reading at the Community Church in Manhattan as a result of Dill's outreach, made his literary debut in *The Crisis*. In 1921, he responded to Fauset's invitation and submitted the powerful poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" to *The Crisis*. Between his departure from Columbia and his return to college at Lincoln University, Hughes wrote and published works that grew out of his growing awareness of racial prejudice and the limitations placed on people of color in America. His works also were inspired by his observations and experiences of Harlem, where he continued to take advantage of the rich and diverse arts and culture offerings. Alain Locke was impressed by Hughes's poems and made an earnest effort to meet the young poet, whose works embodied the excellence and sophistication of African-American writing that Locke was determined to showcase. In 1924, while working as a busboy in a Washington, D.C., hotel, Hughes slipped three poems onto the dinner table of Vachel Lindsay, a hotel guest, renowned poet, and one of Hughes's favorite poets. Lindsay, impressed by the works, later interrupted his own poetry reading to share Hughes's works with his audience. Lindsay's promotion of Hughes, coupled with his advice to the aspiring writer to "hide, study, read, and think," was a powerful moment in Hughes's artistic development. Pursued by the press, who were determined to find the "busboy poet," as Hughes was described, he eventually quit his hotel job and moved back to New York.

Hughes published his first volume of poems just before he began college at Lincoln. He also was the celebrated winner of the first literary competition sponsored by *Opportunity* magazine. In May 1925 he won first prize for "The Weary Blues," saw his poem "America" tie for third prize with poems by Countee Cullen, and garnered honorable mention for "The Jester" and "Songs to the Dark Virgin." In August he emerged as a double winner in the first prizes awarded in the Amy Spingarn Contest in Literature and Art. His essay "The Fascination of Cities" won the $40 second prize in the essay contest, and his poems "Cross" and "Minstrel Man" earned the $10 third prize. Hughes continued to win prestigious literary prizes throughout the Harlem Renaissance. These included first place in the 1926 Witter Bynner undergraduate poetry contest and the 1927 *Palms* Magazine Intercollegiate Poetry award. In 1931 he won the *Harmon* gold medal for literature for his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*. In 1935 he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and in 1941 received a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship.


Hughes was a master of the short story form. He published several collections, including *The Ways of White Folks* (1934) after traveling through Russia, China, and Japan. He started writing while in Moscow and completed the volume, which was inspired by his readings of D. H. Lawrence, in Carmel, California, while part of a writers community.

Hughes had extremely productive collaborations with major figures of the Harlem Renaissance. His most well-documented friendships and working relationships involve Arna Bontemps, Zora Neale Hurston, and Carl Van Vechten.

Hughes and Bontemps met in 1924 and one year later began a correspondence that would last until Hughes's death in 1967. During that 42-year period, the writers exchanged some 2,300 letters. The two writers exchanged work, critiqued each other's writing, networked, discussed the works and lives of fellow writers and friends, and encouraged each other tirelessly. The Hughes-Bontemps correspondence provides vital insights into their professional development, gives invaluable commentary on the Harlem Renaissance, and showcases a rich friendship between two gifted, thoughtful, and ambitious individuals.
Hughes and Bontemps made important contributions to American literary history through their edited collections of African-American poetry. In 1949 the two edited *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746–1949*, a volume that documented the evolution of African-American poetry and showcased works by well- and lesser-known Harlem Renaissance poets. These included writers such as Gwendolyn Bennett, Sterling Brown, Joseph Cotter, Sr., Clarissa Scott Delany, Jessie Fauset, Georgia Douglas Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, Effie Lee Newsome, and Jean Toomer.

One of Hughes's most memorable and explosive alliances was with another longtime friend and correspondent, Zora Neale Hurston. Like Hurston and Alain Locke, Hughes was a beneficiary of Charlotte Osgood Mason, a demanding and wealthy patron. During his affiliation with Mason, which lasted from 1927 through 1930, Hughes published *Not Without Laughter*. The relationship ended disastrously and caused Hughes much emotional and financial distress. In 1926 Hughes and Hurston, working alongside Wallace Thurman, Bruce Nugent, and Aaron Douglas, established *Fire!!*, the powerful but short-lived literary journal. Hughes and Hurston collaborated on the play *Mule Bone*. Subsequent machinations on Hurston's part, coupled with the unauthorized distribution of the work, however, prompted a real conflict between the two literary giants.

Hughes also developed a lifelong relationship with Carl Van Vechten, a dance critic and the author of the controversial novel *Nigger Heaven*. Hughes and Van Vechten solidified their friendship in the tumultuous days that followed the publication of the novel. Hughes was one of the African-American literati who defended the work against those who deemed it thoroughly racist. When Van Vechten was sued for copyright infringement based on his unauthorized inclusion of blues songs in the novel, it was Hughes who composed new lyrics to be included in the book.

Hughes was one of America's most successful and prolific playwrights. He combined his love of theater with work in related fields of film and music. In 1937 he established the Harlem Suitcase Theatre, a group that contributed to the tradition of innovative drama inaugurated by the Howard Players based at Howard University under the direction of T. Montgomery Gregory. The troupe produced his play *Don't You Want to Be Free? From Slavery Through the Blues to Now—and Then Some, Limitations of Life* (1938), *The Em-Fuehrer Jones* (1938), and other works. In 1935, Hughes tackled the issues of miscegenation, family chaos, and betrayal in *Mulatto*, the play that became the longest-running African-American play on Broadway until 1959, when Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* broke the record. *Mulatto* was banned in Philadelphia because of its subject matter. Additional Harlem Renaissance-era plays include *Soul Gone Home* (1937), *Little Eva's End* (1938), and *The Organizer* (1939). Hughes produced a substantial number of plays in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s including *For This We Fight* (1943), *The Glory Round His Head* (1953), *The Ballad of the Brown King* (1960), *Tambourines to Glory* (1963), and *The Prodigal Son* (1965).

Hughes enjoyed writing sessions with Rosamond Johnson, brother of the novelist and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People director James Weldon Johnson. Hughes also composed lyrics for musician W. C. Handy and for Caroline Dudley, who was working on a musical revue entitled *O Blues!* that would showcase African-American folk songs. Hughes continued to work in theater after the Harlem Renaissance. He returned to Cleveland and wrote two dramas for the Jelliffes and the Gilpin Players, their dramatic troupe. The Cleveland plays, written in 1936, were *Little Ham*, a comedy, and *Emperor of Haiti*, a historical drama. His later works included the staging of *The Sun Do Move* in Chicago in 1941, lyrics for Kurt Weill and Elmer Rice's Broadway production *Street Scene* (1946), *Black Nativity* (1961), a multi-genre performance piece, a Civil Rights-related drama entitled *Jericho—Jim Crow* (1964), and numerous adaptations of his own writings. In 1957 his series of lively short stories about Jesse B. Semple became *Simply Heavenly*, a Broadway musical. Hughes's foray into film included collaborations with Clarence Muse on the 1939 film *Way Down South*, for which Hughes wrote the screenplay.

In 1930 Hughes published his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, a fictionalized autobiographical narrative. In 1932 he collaborated with his close friend Arna Bontemps and published *Popo and Fifina*, a children's story about Haiti.

Hughes published *The Big Sea*, the first installment of his two-part autobiography, in 1940. Sixteen years later, he completed *I Wonder As I Wander*. In the decades before his death, Hughes continued to write, travel, and generate illuminating analyses of contemporary issues and world events. As a correspondent for the Baltimore Afro-American newspaper, he provided coverage of the Spanish Civil War. In 1942 he became a regular contributor to the Chicago Defender. During the 1950s, Hughes, like Paul Robeson and Albert Einstein, was targeted by the McCarthyists. Hughes was subpoenaed to testify before Congress but refused to implicate any of his colleagues or friends.

A member of Omega Psi Phi, Hughes also enjoyed memberships in professional societies such as the Authors Guild, Dramatic
Langston Hughes lived in Harlem in a three-story town house purchased from the royalties earned from his Broadway collaboration with Kurt Weill and Elmer Rice. He died of congestive heart failure and complications from prostate cancer at Polyclinic Hospital, where he recently had undergone surgery. He was alone when he died in his sleep on May 22, 1967. Roy Wilkins, director of the NAACP, mourned the passing of the man "who in his own remarkable way was a crusader for freedom for millions of people." Whitney Young, Jr., National Urban League director, remembered Hughes as a "courageous fighter for human rights and dignity." The New York Times eulogized Hughes as the "O. Henry of Harlem." The newspaper's tribute to Hughes conveyed his vibrant personality through its colorful quotes in which Hughes defined himself as a man who was "unmarried" and liked "'Tristan,' goat's milk, short novels, lyric poems, heat, simple folk, boats and bull fights" and disliked "'Aida,' parsnips, long novels, narrative poems, cold, pretentious folk, buses, and bridges." In keeping with the stipulations that Hughes dictated in his will, funeral services were held in a Harlem funeral home with music provided by a jazz combo, the Randy Weston Trio.

The full life and stunning career of Langston Hughes underscore the richness, power, and depth of the Harlem Renaissance.

Further Information


Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection, Beinecke Library, Yale University; Moorland-Spingarn Research Library, Howard University; Fisk University Library; Amistad Collection, New Orleans; and Bancroft Library of the University of California at Berkeley.


Copyright © 2018 Infobase Learning. All Rights Reserved.