Langston Hughes
1902-1967

(Full name James Mercer Langston Hughes) American poet, dramatist, novelist, nonfiction, and short story writer.

The following entry presents an overview of Langston Hughes's career through 1995. For further information on his life and works, see CLC, Volumes 1, 5, 10, 15, 35, and 44.

INTRODUCTION

Langston Hughes is one of the best known African-American writers of the twentieth century and a figure at the forefront of the Harlem Renaissance. Through his poetry Hughes expressed the voice of many African Americans, capturing the language, experiences and strength of common people. While Hughes is known as the poet laureate of Harlem, he has also been recognized for his depictions of the African-American struggle in his prose, plays, and literature for children.

Biographical Information

Hughes was born February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. While he was an infant his parents split and he moved to Lawrence, Kansas where he was cared for by his grandmother. His mother worked in Kansas City as an actress and his father practiced law in Mexico. When Hughes's grandmother died he moved briefly to Illinois before settling in Cleveland, Ohio where he attended Central High School. There he ran on the track team and was the class poet, publishing poems in the school newspaper. After he graduated he lived for a year with his father in Mexico and then attended Columbia University for one year. Hughes took various jobs and traveled the world. In 1926 he published his first book of poems *The Weary Blues*. He attended Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, earning a B.A. in 1929. In 1930 his first novel *Not Without Laughter* won the Harmon gold medal for literature and Hughes decided to pursue a career in writing. He lectured across the country and lived in New York City, writing prolifically. Throughout the 1930s Hughes

known as a poet. He published his first collection of poetry *The Weary Blues* in 1926, containing one of his most famous poems: "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Other important volumes of poetry are *Fine Clothes for the Jews* (1927), *Mitage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), *Selected Poems Langston Hughes* (1959), and *Ask Your Mama: 12 Mon* for *Jazz* (1961). In his poetry Hughes renders the voices, experiences, emotions, and spirit of African Americans. In attempt to capture the lives of everyday African American he deals with subjects like prostitution, racism, lynching and teenage pregnancy. Hughes is well known for the influence of jazz and bebop music in his poetry, both as a subject matter and as a structure. Critics have noted his skill...
the text, and the way it reverberates event today, will be a powerful to an adult as to a child.

“Misery is when you heard on the radio that the neighborhood you live in is a slum but you always thought it was home... Misery is when you can see all the other kids in the dark but they claim they can’t see you.”

The language is as skeletal and yet as monumental as a dinosaur’s bones. Langston Hughes tells us what black misery is, even while the alchemy of his writing turns that misery into literature.

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**FURTHER READING**

**Criticism**


Considers *The Ways of White Folks* a worthwhile book but believes Hughes’s writing is hurt by his hatred for whites.

Davis, Thadious M. “Reading the Woman’s Face in Langston Hughes’s and Roy De Carava’s *Sweet Flypaper of Life*.” *The Langston Hughes Review* XII, No. 1 (Spring 1993) 22-8.

Discusses the role of change in *Sweet Flypaper of Life*.


Favorably reviews *Fields of Wonder*.


Analyzes Hughes’s portrayal of the jazz subculture in his poetry.


Argues that Hughes’s strength lies in his simple poems.


Argues that DuBois was impressed with Hughes because Hughes portrayed life truthfully.

Hutchinson, George B. “Langston Hughes and the ‘Other Whitman.’” In *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman*...

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Chronicles the influence of Walt Whitman on Hughes.


Compares the careers of jazz musician Duke Ellington and Hughes, arguing that they fit into both “high” and “low” art.


Provides an overview of Hughes’s poetry.


Praises the rhythms and diversity of subjects in *Fine Clothes for the Jew*.


Chronicles the difficulties Hughes faced in presenting his vision of African-America on stage.


Illustrates how Hughes altered *Not Without Laughter* to meet with the approval of his patron Charlotte Mason.


Discusses the impact Walker’s friendship with Hughes had on her career.


Compare the works of Hughes and Nicolás Guillén, arguing that Hughes served as a muse for Guillén.