



Biography of Langston Hughes



Langston Hughes (1902-1967), American writer, known for the use of jazz and black folk rhythms in his poetry. James Mercer Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, and educated at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. He published his first poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” in *Crisis* magazine in 1921 and studied at Columbia University from 1921 to 1922. He then lived for a time in Paris. After his return to the United States, he worked as a busboy in Washington, D.C. There, in 1925, his literary skills were discovered after he left three of his poems

beside the plate of American poet Vachel Lindsay, who recognized Hughes’s abilities and subsequently helped publicize Hughes’s work.

Right: Langston Hughes working as a bus boy

Hughes wrote in many genres, but he is best known for his poetry, in which he disregarded classical forms in favor of musical rhythms and the oral and improvisatory traditions of black culture. In the 1920s, when he lived in New York City, he was a prominent figure during the Harlem Renaissance and was referred to as the Poet Laureate of Harlem. His innovations in form and voice influenced many black writers. Hughes also wrote the drama *Mulatto* (1935), which was performed on Broadway 373 times.

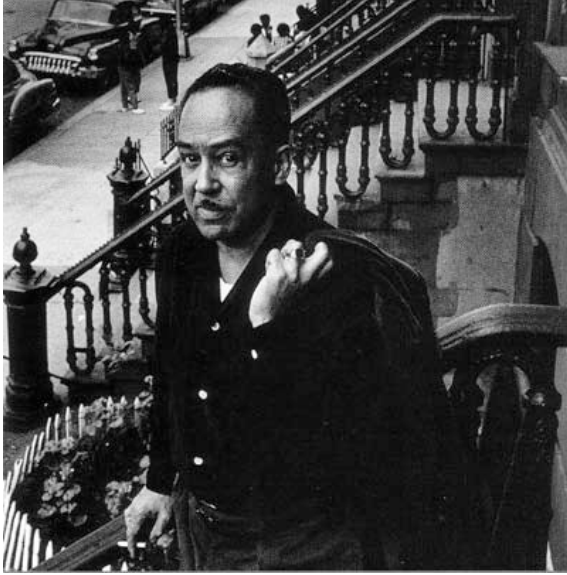


Beginning in the 1930s, Hughes was active in social and political causes, using his poetry as a vehicle for social protest. He traveled to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Haiti, and Japan, and he served as the Madrid correspondent for a Baltimore, Maryland, newspaper during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).



Langston Hughes - Second from left with Louise Patterson, nicknamed Madame Moscow, a Harlem-based civil rights and labor activist.

In the 1940s, first for the *Chicago Defender* and later for the *New York Post*, Hughes wrote a newspaper column in the voice of the character Simple (also called Jesse B. Semple), who expressed the thoughts of young black Americans. Simple’s plain speech, humor, and use of dialect belied his wisdom and common sense. The character became famous and later figured in many of Hughes’s short stories.



Left: Langston Hughes at his Manhattan residence in the 1960s.

Hughes wrote more than 50 books. His works include the poetry volumes *Weary Blues* (1926), *The Dream Keeper* (1932), *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942), and *Fields of Wonder* (1947) and the short-story collections *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), *Simple Speaks His Mind* (1950), *Simple Takes a Wife* (1953), and *Best of Simple* (1961). Hughes also wrote the novels *Not Without Laughter* (1930) and *Tambourines to Glory* (1958), the autobiographical books *The Big Sea* (1940) and *I Wonder as I Wander* (1957), and the children's books *Black Misery* (1969) and *The Sweet and Sour Animal Book* (written 1936, published 1994). *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* was published in 1994.