



## Harlem Renaissance Literature Langston Hughes

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**Abstract:** Langston Hughes and the basic themes of his poetry. It is important to know about an idea of that period. Theoretical part of the work can be useful for the articles, diploma works in American Literature. The Practical value lies in as a source of preparation for lectures and seminars on American literature classes.

**Key words:** Brownies Book, Crisis, Mulatto, Simple, renaissance.

James Langston Hughes was born in Missouri on February 1, 1902 to parents who soon separated. Langston's childhood was spent in the care of friends and relatives throughout the midwest and northeast. He moved frequently and felt abandoned. In an attempt to deal with his loneliness, Langston began to write poetry. He was a frequent visitor to the local library. Langston believed in books more than people. While attending high school, Langston was active in many extra curricular activities including the school magazine. Many of his published poems showed the influence of his favorite poets, Carl Sandburg and Walt Whitman. The themes were often of social injustices and what it meant to be black. Realizing he couldn't depend on his parents for financial support, he began to work and save his money for college. He published his first poem in *Brownies Book*, a new magazine for black children. Soon *Crisis*, a companion magazine which targeted black adults, published several of his poems. *Crisis* was published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It was a forum for blacks to share their struggles. The editors were Jessie Fauset and W. E. B. Du Bois. Both were among a growing number of black artists and intellectuals in Harlem, New York. Langston established his position in the group before arriving in Harlem from Mexico.

Harlem in the 1920s was the largest and most influential black community in the United States. Intelligences and the arts were the focus of change, often referred to as the Harlem Renaissance. Concerts, lectures and black only private clubs invited African Americans to migrate to Harlem. Hughes finally arrived in New York on September 4, 1921 to attend Columbia University. Langston felt frustrated at Columbia due to the coolness of his white peers. His grades began to suffer and finally he quit and looked for a job. Jobs were still hard to come by for most blacks. He longed to work on a ship that would sail abroad. After much persistence, he headed to Africa on a freighter. Hughes was disturbed by the African tribes' lack of political and economical freedom. The Africans considered him white because of his brown skin and straight dark hair. It was here that he met a mulatto child who was ignored by the Africans and the whites. This was a source of inspiration for his play, "Mulatto." Hughes found work on another freighter and ended up in Paris. While there



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he worked at a nightclub that featured southern cooking and Jazz performers. While moving on to Italy, Hughes was robbed and left stranded wanting to return to the United States. He tried to get a job on a ship headed for the U.S.A., but was told they only hired whites. In this depressed state of mind he wrote, "I, Too, Sing America." He returned to America and found the Harlem Renaissance was spreading across racial boundaries.

Many black poets and authors were now published in mainstream publications. Hughes was warmly welcomed by his peers and recognized for the poetry he wrote while traveling. Hughes began to expand his writing to plays, short stories, articles, essays and an autobiography. Jesse Semple (nicknamed "Simple") became a familiar character in his short stories, which appealed to his black audience. Most people liked the way "Simple" dealt with racism using humor, honesty and determination. In 1927, Hughes loaded his car with books and headed to the south for a poetry reading tour. This tour was to be the first of many. He had never seen the south and hoped it would help him relate to his southern black audience. His writing became a source of inspiration for blacks who lived in the most racially tense area of the country. While on tour he was scorned by whites for being a troublemaker. Hughes realized the importance of education and received his degree from Lincoln University in 1929. As the Great Depression started, Hughes felt the financial impact along with the rest of the country. Langston became interested in socialism during his youth. His belief that all property should be divided equally among society led him to join the Communist party.

In 1932, he went to the Soviet Union as part of a team of writers to produce a documentary. He admired the Soviet Union and saw it as a symbol of hope. Though the country was poor and struggling, Hughes noticed there was no racism or economic divisions. He wrote the poem "One More 'S' in the U. S. A." for the U. S. Communist party in 1934. In later years, his involvement with the Communist party brought him before the McCarthy Committee which was investigating the influence of communism in the United States. This was during a time of nationwide anti-communist hysteria (The Cold War). Hughes made a deal with the committee and no charges were ever filed. But the experience brought his character into question. During World War II in 1942, Hughes was called to serve on the Writers War Board. Hughes wrote jingles to inspire the troops as well as to fight segregation such as, "Looks like by now, Folks ought to know, It's hard to beat Hitler, Protecting Jim Crow." Because of this publicity, Hughes became a familiar name in many American households. Because of Hughes extensive travels overseas, he became a cultural emissary to Europe and Africa for the U.S. State Department from 1960 through 1963. Langston Hughes died on May 22, 1967 in New York City, but his words still inspire each generation. The lives he affected with his words could never be numbered. He brought hope to African Americans and encouraged tolerance and understanding from whites. He blazed a trail for future black poets and earned the title of "The Black Poet Laureate."

The nick-names which were used to describe him also tell of variation, both in genre and quality. It seems quite remarkable that such different expressions as "Shakespeare in Harlem", the "poet laureate of the Negro", and the "poet low-rate of Harlem" was used to classify one and the same person. By using the "black voice" as a weapon in his fight for African American's rights, he managed to present the demand for just treatment in a very striking fashion. Because he employed the popular blues and jazz in his poetry, he identified its origin and forced the white population to recognize and appreciate the assets of the black culture. He thus clearly displayed the connection



between the internationally celebrated music, and the culture of the blacks. Thereby he transformed the black masses from being “beggars at the back door”, pleading for.

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