

BIOGRAPHY

LANGSTON HUGHES

Langston Hughes was one of the most important writers of the Harlem Renaissance, which was a cultural movement in the U.S. in the 1920s and 30s. During this time the neighbourhoods of Harlem in New York City experienced an explosion of African-Americans moving into the area. A majority of these new residents were artists, musicians, and writers. Langston Hughes was one such writer who moved to Harlem in 1924.

Hughes' creative genius was influenced by the oral histories passed on to him by his grandmother with whom he lived for part of his childhood. She told him many stories about how the African people were captured in Africa and brought to America where they would live their lives as slaves. Her stories were

stories of the black man's on-going fight for freedom and justice. Although she died when Hughes was only twelve, her stories stayed with him and played a large role in determining the kinds of things he began to write.

When he was only fourteen, Hughes wrote his first poem, and from that moment on, he was always writing – short stories, essays, plays, novels – but he is most remembered for his poetry. It was his high school English teacher who first recognized Hughes' talent, and as she introduced him to some of the great poets, his writing began to flourish. He wrote about black people as he saw them – happy, sorrowful, angry, beautiful – which became a source of criticism by other African-Americans. They felt that Hughes was writing about what were the unattractive sides of black life, but in Hughes words, he said that he wanted his poetry to be about *“workers, roustabouts, singers, and job hunters on Lenox Avenue in New York, or Seventh Street in Washington or South State in Chicago”*. He wanted to tell their stories reflected by their everyday lives, and he did that by describing *“people up today and down tomorrow, working this week, and fired the next, beaten and baffled, but determined not to be wholly beaten, buying furniture on the installment plan, filling the house with roomers to help pay the rent, hoping to get a new suit for Easter – and then pawning*



that suit before the Fourth of July". He was considered the People's Poet because he faithfully wrote about the various nuances of black life with both its celebrations and its frustrations; he wrote about things with which the common man could identify.

Hughes wrote in order to illuminate the condition of the black man in America. With his words, he confronted racism, he protested social conditions and ultimately he expanded the view of the African-American, but he did so in such a unique way as the Jazz Movement of the Harlem Renaissance heavily influenced his writing. He took the rhythms of jazz and coupled them with the words from his soul and created poetry that was and still is uniquely his own.

His first published poem is also one of his most well known. Hughes wrote "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" when he was only 17 and dedicated it to W.E.B. DuBois, and like all of his writings, it talks about the things that the black man has seen and how those things have shaped the person he has become.

I, TOO

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed--
I, too, am America.

(1925)