**Langston Hughes Biography**

**African-American Writer, Poet, Kansan | February 1, 1902 – May 22, 1967**

**(from http://www.kansasheritage.org/crossingboundaries/page6e1.html)**

(James) Langston Hughes began writing in high school, and even at this early age was developing the voice that made him famous. Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, but lived with his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas until he was thirteen and then with his mother in Lincoln, Illinois and Cleveland, Ohio where he went to high school. Hughes's grandmother, Mary Sampson Patterson Leary Langston, was prominent in the African American community in Lawrence. Her first husband had died at Harper's Ferry fighting with John Brown; her second husband, Lanston Hughes's grandfather, was a prominent Kansas politician during Reconstruction. During the time Hughes lived with his grandmother, however, she was old and poor and unable to give Hughes the attention he needed. Besides, Hughes felt hurt by both his mother and his father, and was unable to understand why he was not allowed to live with either of them. These feelings of rejection caused him to grow up very insecure and unsure of himself.

When Langston Hughes's grandmother died, his mother summoned him to her home in Lincoln, Illinois. Here, according to Hughes, he wrote his first verse and was named class poet of his eighth grade class. Hughes lived in Lincoln for only a year, however; when his step-father found work in Cleveland, Ohio, the rest of the family then followed him there. Soon his step-father and mother moved on, this time to Chicago, but Hughes stayed in Cleveland in order to finish high school. His writing talent was recognized by his high school teachers and classmates, and Hughes had his first pieces of verse published in the Central High *Monthly*, a sophisticated school magazine. Soon he was on the staff of the *Monthly*, and publishing in the magazine regularly. An English teacher introduced him to poets such as Carl Sandburg and Walk Whitman, and these became Hughes' earliest influences. During the summer after Hughes's junior year in high school, his father reentered his life. James Hughes was living in Toluca, Mexico, and wanted his son to join him there. Hughes lived in Mexico for the summer but he did not get along with his father. This conflict, though painful, apparently contributed to Hughes's maturity. When Hughes returned to Cleveland to finish high school, his writing had also matured. Consequently, during his senior year of high school, Langston Hughes began writing poetry of distinction.

After graduating from high school, Hughes planned to return to Mexico to visit with his father, in order to try to convince him that he should pay for his son's college education at Columbia University in New York City. At Columbia, Hughes thought, he could get a college education but also begin his career as a writer. On his way to Mexico on the train, while thinking about his past and his future, Hughes wrote the famous poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." After arriving in Mexico, the tension between Hughes and his father was strong. Hughes wanted to be a writer; his father wanted him to be an engineer. After Hughes sent some of his poetry to the Brownies Book and [*Crisis*](http://www.kansasheritage.org/crossingboundaries/images/crisis1.jpg) magazines and it was accepted, his father was impressed enough to agree to pay for a year at Columbia University.

Hughes entered Columbia University in the fall of 1921, a little more than a year after he had graduated from Central High School. Langston stayed in school there for only a year; meanwhile, he found Harlem. Hughes quickly became an integral part of the arts scene in Harlem, so much so that in many ways he defined the spirit of the age, from a literary point of view. [*The Big Sea*](http://www.kansasheritage.org/crossingboundaries/page8cont.html#hughprim1), the first volume of his autobiography, provides such a crucial first-person account of the era and its key players that much of what we know about the [*Harlem Renaissance*](http://www.kansasheritage.org/crossingboundaries/pagex6e2.html) we know from Langston Hughes's point of view. Hughes began regularly publishing his work in the [*Crisis*](http://www.kansasheritage.org/crossingboundaries/images/crisis2.jpg) and *Opportunity* magazines. He got to know other writers of the time such as Countee Cullen, Claude McCay, W.E.B. DuBois, and James Weldon Johnson. When his poem "[The Weary Blues](http://www.kansasheritage.org/crossingboundaries/weary.html)" won first prize in the poetry section of the 1925 *Opportunity* magazine literary contest, Hughes's literary career was launched. His first volume of poetry, also titled *The Weary Blues*, appeared in 1926.

In Langston Hughes's poetry, he uses the rhythms of African American music, particularly blues and jazz. This sets his poetry apart from that of other writers, and it allowed him to experiment with a very rhythmic free verse. Hughes's second volume of poetry, [*Fine Clothes to the Jew*](http://www.kansasheritage.org/crossingboundaries/page8cont.html#?) (1927), was not well received at the time of its publication because it was too experimental. Now, however, many critics believe the volume to be among Hughes's finest work.

Langston Hughes returned to school in 1926, this time to the historically black Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. He was supported by a patron of the arts, a wealthy white woman in her seventies named Charlotte Osgood Mason. Mason directed Hughes's literary career, convincing him to write the novel *Not Without Laughter*; the two had a dispute in 1930, however, and the relationship came to an end. At this point in Hughes's life he turned to the political left and began to develop his interest in socialism. He published poetry in *New Masses*, a journal associated with the Communist Party, and in 1932 sailed to the Soviet Union with a group of young African Americans. Later in the 1930s, Hughes's primary writing was for the theater. His drama about miscegenation and the South - "Mulatto" - became the longest running Broadway play written by an African American until Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" (1958).

In 1942, during World War II, Hughes began writing a column for the African American newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*. In 1943 he introduced the character of Jesse B. Semple, or Simple, to his readers. This fictional everyman, while humorous, also allowed Hughes to discuss very serious racial issues. The Simple columns were also popular--and they ran for twenty years and were collected in several books.

Money was a nagging concern for Hughes throughout his life. While he managed to support himself as a writer, no small task, he was never financially secure. In 1947, however, through his work writing the lyrics for the Broadway musical "Street Scene," [Hughes](http://www.kansasheritage.org/crossingboundaries/images/hughes4.jpg%22%20%5Ct%20%22target) was finally able to earn enough money to purchase a house in Harlem, which had been his dream. He continued to write: "Montage of a Dream Deferred," one of his best known volumes of poetry, was published in 1951; and from that time until his death sixteen years later he wrote more than twenty additional works.

Langston Hughes was, in his later years, deemed the "Poet Laureate of the Negro Race," a title he encouraged. Hughes meant to represent the race in his writing and he was, perhaps, the most original of all African American poets. On May 22, 1967 Langston Hughes died after having had abdominal surgery. Hughes' funeral, like his poetry, was all blues and jazz: the jazz pianist Randy Weston was called and asked to play for Hughes's funeral. Very little was said by way of eulogy, but the jazz and the blues were hot, and the final tribute to this writer so influenced by African American musical forms was fitting.