

LANGSTON HUGHES

James Mercer Langston Hughes, also known as Langston Hughes was an African American. He was born in Joplin, Missouri to James and Carrie Hughes in 1902. After being deserted by his father, he and his mother went to Lawrence, Kansas to live with his grandmother. In the midst of struggle to achieve racial equality in life for the Hughes family was not easy. Most of Hughes' early childhood was spent with his grandmother while his mother, a schoolteacher, attempted to support their family to the best of her ability His life consisted of many ups and downs, which influenced his life drastically leading to his passion for writing poetry as a way of exiting his life situations.

In his early years of life, he was writing poetry constantly and was even recognized as the class poet in grammar school, even though being that it was only two blacks in the classroom, and stereotypically blacks did not have the ability to create such works, he went beyond the mind set of society. Later on, Hughes traveled to be with his father to continue his life in Mexico, however their relationship was not successful, but in essence it was a set up for failure. This experience led Hughes to contemplate his suicide. But because of his enduring power and strength he overcame his obstacles and later went back to live with his mother

Hughes encountered the harsh reality of racism at a very young age. When the time came to attend school, Hughes was forced to travel to a school across town because he was "black". Hughes' mother, refused to accept this, for there was a "white" school near their home. Ms. Hughes fought the school board on this issue in order for her son to attend the school that was closer and more convenient. She won the case and Hughes was allowed to attend the preferred school (Mikolyzk, 1990). It was here that Hughes began his journey as a writer. Ironically, this

journey began when his teacher, claiming that black people have “rhythm”, chose Hughes as class poet. Rather than denying this stereotype, Hughes used it as an opportunity to display his amazing talents. After graduating from Central High, the opportunity arose for Hughes to move to Mexico to live with his father. While living in Mexico, he published “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, a short poem exploring the journeys of African-American slavery (Hughes, p.9). After a disagreement with his father Hughes spent years traveling and later graduated from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. He obtained a B.A. at Lincoln University, an honorary doctorate at Howard University, both HBCU’s.

At a young age Hughes had not only recognized, but also been a part of an ongoing battle to live as an African American in the United States. Hughes, who had a difficult early life and encountered racism daily remained loyal to his heritage. With an undeniable respect for his African American background, Hughes made racial pride the basis of his best works. Langston Hughes’ struggles as young black man shaped who he became as a both a writer and an inspirational leader to the African American community and the world.

Langston Hughes’s main obstacle in his life was the increasing political views of racial discrimination. This led to him writing his various works expressing his perspective and opinions about the issues facing America during that time period. He also did not just write to condescend America’s views towards blacks, but to even make a point about the other black writers during this time to show them the importance of writing not just to criticize harshly but to demonstrate an educated and thought out way of expressing one’s views. He sought a world of

communism, an ideology that seeks to establish a lack of social status and classless views, to diminish societal segregation.

With job opportunities scarce and lacking knowledge of the job market, Hughes knew he must make use of his talents and become a writer (Hughes, p.39). He soon discovered that writing was a difficult way to earn a living. Hughes saw little results, and even less money, from his early writings. Even with limited income, and his chosen lifestyle hard, he refused to ignore the roots of his culture. Hughes soon found that he had one problem in particular; he had to figure out how he would “make a living from the kind of writing [he] wanted to do” (Hughes, p.40). As Hughes wrote in his Autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*, “I wanted to write seriously and as well as I knew how about the Negro people”. He quickly established a style of his own; a style that reflected his personal experiences as an African American in a time of racial inequality.

Hughes soon decided that he must make his work known, so he began to read his poetry to the public. After telling everyone where he was born, and a little bit about the struggles in his life that led him to writing such distinctive poetry. By doing this, he was aiming to make his audience laugh, think critically, and understand his culture through the various poems he had written (Hughes, p.86).

After building a name for himself, several books were published with his poems as a central focus. While Hughes was a renowned writer in the United States, and even around the world, he was not only a poet. He should also be known for his accomplishments in other areas

of writing. “Hughes was a master dramatist whose plays alone would earn him a place in African American literary history (Baxter, 2002). With many of his poems already in the form of lyrics, Hughes began to write operas and plays. Soon, *Mulatto*, a play by Hughes premiered as the basis of *The Barrier*, an opera in 1950 (Mikolyzk, p.23). Hughes was now more inspired to write and, in the midst of desegregation, he completed a book of poems about the life in Harlem. “*Montage of a Dream Deferred*” appeared in 1951 as a reflection of the hardships of African American life (Hughes, p.14).

Hughes published many books about the Negro culture throughout the 1950’s. Famous American Negroes, *The First book of Rhythms*, and *Famous American Negroes*, to name a few, are great books Langston Hughes wrote in honor of his culture. With things already going great for him, “the end of 1956 saw a brighter future for Hughes. The play ‘*Simply Heavenly*’ finally found a producer” and ran for several weeks on Broadway (Mikolyzk, p.25). In 1960, Hughes finally received a much-awaited award from the NAACP. The Spingarn Medal was awarded to him for “the greatest contribution to the betterment of the black cause in America” (Mikolyzk, p.27). This award was very prestigious and Hughes was extremely honored.

In *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*, it was said that, “Langston Hughes was perhaps the most wide-ranging and persistent black American writer in the twentieth century” (Tracy, p.23). Hughes, a fan of Walt Whitman’s poetry, often stressed the importance of an individual’s personal worth (Dickinson, p.15). Similar to Whitman’s work, a common theme of Hughes’s early writings was pride, both in color and in the African American heritage (Dickinson, p.16). In an autobiography, Hughes said, “A poet is a human being. Each human

being must live within the boundaries of his country” (Tracy, p. 66). Hughes did this well through his works. He wrote about his time and his people as though it was his mission to bring them together peacefully.

Langston Hughes was truly an inspiration to the people of his culture and all others who read his words. Hughes was considered to be “the most representative of African American writers by virtue of his publication in virtually all areas of literary activity” (Baxter, 2002). While giving both encouragement and hope to slaves, along with all who struggled through the times of segregation, Hughes created a safe haven for them. They could read the poems and writings and know that they were not alone; someone else was feeling the same hurt as them and had faith that their tribulations would soon be resolved. Not only did he serve as an inspirational leader throughout his time, but through the years of segregation. Along with capturing the grief and struggles of the African American race, Langston Hughes was able to give light to the complications of race relations in America; and the Negro race, in general (Baxter, 2002).

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