|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Langston Hughes Photo by Consuelo Kanaga | http://poets.org/images/spacer.gif |
| http://poets.org/images/spacer.gif | |

**Langston Hughes (1902--1967)**

James Langston Hughes was born February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. His parents divorced when he was a small child, and his father moved to Mexico. He was raised by his grandmother until he was thirteen, when he moved to Lincoln, Illinois, to live with his mother and her husband, before the family eventually settled in Cleveland, Ohio. It was in Lincoln, Illinois, that Hughes began writing poetry. Following graduation, he spent a year in Mexico and a year at Columbia University. During these years, he held odd jobs as an assistant cook, launderer, and a busboy, and travelled to Africa and Europe working as a seaman. In November 1924, he moved to Washington, D.C. Hughes's first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, was published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1926. He finished his college education at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania three years later. In 1930 his first novel, *Not Without Laughter,* won the Harmon gold medal for literature.

Hughes, who claimed [Paul Lawrence Dunbar](http://poets.org/pldun), [Carl Sandburg](http://poets.org/csand), and [Walt Whitman](http://poets.org/wwhit) as his primary influences, is particularly known for his insightful, colorful portrayals of black life in America from the twenties through the sixties. He wrote novels, short stories and plays, as well as poetry, and is also known for his engagement with the world of jazz and the influence it had on his writing, as in "Montage of a Dream Deferred." His life and work were enormously important in shaping the artistic contributions of the artistic movement known as the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. He wanted to tell the stories of his people in ways that reflected their actual culture, including both their suffering and their love of music, laughter, and language itself.

Langston Hughes died of complications from prostate cancer in May 22, 1967, in New York. In his memory, his residence at 20 East 127th Street in Harlem, New York City, has been given landmark status by the New York City Preservation Commission, and East 127th Street has been renamed "Langston Hughes Place."

In addition to leaving us a large body of poetic work, Hughes wrote eleven plays and countless works of prose, including the well-known “Simple” books: *Simple Speaks His Mind*, *Simple Stakes a Claim,Simple Takes a Wife*, and *Simple's Uncle Sam*. He edited the anthologies *The Poetry of the Negro* and *The Book of Negro Folklore,* wrote an acclaimed autobiography *(The Big Sea)* and co-wrote the play *Mule Bone* with Zora Neale Hurston.

**A Selected Bibliography**

**Poetry**

*Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961)  
*Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1994)  
*Dear Lovely Death* (1931)  
*Fields of Wonder* (1947)  
*Freedom's Plow* (1943)  
*Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951)  
*One-Way Ticket* (1949)  
*Scottsboro Limited* (1932)  
*Selected Poems* (1959)  
*Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942)  
*The Dream Keeper and Other Poems* (1932)  
*The Panther and the Lash: Poems of Our Times* (1967)  
*The Weary Blues* (1926)

**Prose**

*Good Morning, Revolution: Uncollected Social Protest Writings by Langston Hughes* (1973)  
*I Wonder as I Wander* (1956)  
*Laughing to Keep From Crying* (1952)  
*Not Without Laughter* (1930)  
*Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925-1964* (2001)  
*Simple Speaks His Mind* (1950)  
*Simple Stakes a Claim* (1957)  
*Simple Takes a Wife* (1953)  
*Simple's Uncle Sam* (1965)  
*Something in Common and Other Stories* (1963)  
*Tambourines to Glory* (1958)  
*The Arna Bontemps-Langston Hughes Letters* (1980)  
*The Big Sea* (1940)  
*The Langston Hughes Reader* (1958)  
*The Ways of White Folks* (1934)

**Mother to Son**

Well, son, I'll tell you:  
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.  
It's had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up,  
And places with no carpet on the floor—  
Bare.  
But all the time   
I'se been a-climbin' on,  
And reachin' landin's,  
And turnin' corners,  
And sometimes goin' in the dark  
Where there ain't been no light.  
So, boy, don't you turn back.  
Don't you set down on the steps.  
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.  
Don't you fall now—  
For I'se still goin', honey,  
I'se still climbin',  
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

**Juke Box Love Song**

I could take the Harlem night  
and wrap around you,  
Take the neon lights and make a crown,  
Take the Lenox Avenue busses,  
Taxis, subways,  
And for your love song tone their rumble down.  
Take Harlem's heartbeat,  
Make a drumbeat,  
Put it on a record, let it whirl,  
And while we listen to it play,  
Dance with you till day--  
Dance with you, my sweet brown Harlem girl.

**The Ballad of the Landlord** (1940)

Landlord, landlord,  
My roof has sprung a leak.  
Don't you 'member I told you about it  
Way last week?  
  
Landlord, landlord,  
These steps is broken down.  
When you come up yourself  
It's a wonder you don't fall down.  
  
Ten Bucks you say I owe you?  
Ten Bucks you say is due?  
Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you  
Till you fix this house up new.  
  
What? You gonna get eviction orders?  
You gonna cut off my heat?  
You gonna take my furniture and  
Throw it in the street?  
  
Um-huh! You talking high and mighty.  
Talk on-till you get through.  
You ain't gonna be able to say a word  
If I land my fist on you.  
  
*Police! Police!  
Come and get this man!  
He's trying to ruin the government  
And overturn the land!*  
Copper's whistle!  
Patrol bell!  
Arrest.  
  
Precinct Station.  
Iron cell.  
Headlines in press:  
  
MAN THREATENS LANDLORD  
TENANT HELD NO BAIL  
JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL!

**Harlem**  
  
What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up   
like a raisin in the sun?   
Or fester like a sore—   
And then run?   
Does it stink like rotten meat?   
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags   
like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*

LANGSTON HUGHES - 1951

Langston Hughes, “Harlem” from Collected Poems.

***Questions about Langston Hughes’ Poetry* Read and annotate all the attached poems.**  
1) In which poem do you see especially powerful imagery? “ ”   
 What is the image(s)?  
  
  
  
 Explain what makes this image especially powerful. What is your interpretation of the image?  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2) Cite the specific lines in “Mother to Son” in which the speaker shares advice/wisdom with her son.   
  
  
  
  
Put the advice/wisdom into your own words here.

3) To what extent is “Juke Box Love Song” a love song? What word choices and images help you develop an interpretation of the poem?  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4) The speaker in “Ballad of the Landlord” asks several questions. Do these lines work well as questions in the poem or would they work better as statements? Explain.

5) What features, ideas, and/or stylistic elements do you see across Hughes’ poetry?