



Soul of Langston

KEY THEMES AND FIGURES IN THE PLAY



Learn about themes of the play and key figures of the Harlem Renaissance.

LANGSTON HUGHES



Langston Hughes, a trailblazing poet, writer, and pivotal figure in the Harlem Renaissance, led a life that left an indelible mark on American literature and culture. Born in 1902, Hughes used his unique voice to capture the essence of the African American experience, addressing themes of racial identity, social justice, and the complexities of human existence. His work, from the groundbreaking “The Weary Blues” to numerous essays, novels, and plays, resonated with a wide audience, fostering a deeper understanding of the African American narrative.

Hughes’ poetic style, characterized by its lyrical and accessible language, made his work relatable to people from all walks of life. His impact extended beyond his written words; he was a beacon of inspiration for future generations of Black artists and writers. Langston Hughes' legacy endures as a testament to the power of literature in driving social change, ensuring his place as a vital force in American culture and history.

HARLEM RENAISSANCE



Following the American Civil War, emancipated African Americans embarked on a quest to discover a nurturing environment in which to embrace their newfound freedom and identities. This haven emerged in the vibrant neighborhood of Harlem in New York City. Harlem, renowned as “The Black Mecca” and “The Capital of Black America,” became a sanctuary for some of the most brilliant minds of the 20th century, giving birth to a profound cultural renaissance.

Prominent writers who made indelible marks during this period included Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Nella Larsen, Countee Cullen, Jessie Redmon Fauset, and the eminent Langston Hughes.

The Harlem Renaissance eventually yielded to the challenges of The Great Depression in the 1930s, but the creative and social movements it ignited persisted in American culture. They found new expressions in music, award-winning literature, and, most notably, in the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the American Black Arts Movement of the 1960's and 1970's, and the birth of Hip-Hop in 1973.



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EARLY CHILDHOOD



James Mercer Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. His parents, James Nathaniel Hughes, a lawyer, and Carrie Langston, a writer and actress, separated soon after his birth, and his father moved to Toluca, Mexico. Hughes' mother moved frequently during his youth, so Hughes was raised primarily by his maternal grandmother, Mary Langston, in Lawrence, Kansas.

Mary Langston died when Langston was 12 years old. Langston then went back to live with his mother, and they moved to several cities before settling in Cleveland, Ohio. It was during this time that Hughes first began to write poetry and one of his teachers introduced him to the poetry of Carl Sandburg and Walt Whitman, both of whom Hughes would cite as primary influences.

Hughes was an avid reader, delving into books to cure his frequent bouts with loneliness. He wrote: "I began to believe in nothing but books and the wonderful world in books—where if people suffered, they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables, as we did in Kansas."

EDUCATION



Hughes graduated from Cleveland Central High School in 1920. In 1921, Hughes enrolled at Columbia University where he quickly became a part of Harlem's burgeoning cultural movement, commonly known as the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes left Columbia in 1922, eventually earning a scholarship to and graduating from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1929. This pivotal period in Hughes' life marked the beginning of his remarkable journey as a prominent figure in American literature and a key contributor to the Harlem Renaissance, reflecting the power of education and cultural exploration in shaping his artistic identity.

BUSBOY TO POET



In 1925, Hughes was working as a busboy in a Washington, DC hotel restaurant when he met American poet Vachel Lindsay. Hughes slipped some of his poems to Lindsay, who was impressed enough to use his connections to promote Hughes' poetry and ultimately bring it to a wider audience. Hughes' first book of poetry, The Weary Blues, was published by Knopf in 1926.



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LIVING AS A WRITER



Langston Hughes was one of the first African American authors able to sustain himself through his writing. He went on to write numerous works of poetry, prose and plays, and was hired by the Baltimore Afro-American newspaper to serve as a war correspondent to cover the Spanish Civil War. Later, he began contributing to a newspaper column that would eventually gain popularity, featured in both the New York Post and the Chicago Defender. For the latter publication, he crafted a street-smart Harlem character named Jesse B. Semple, more widely recognized as “Simple.” Hughes used this character to delve into urban, working-class Black themes and address racial issues. These columns achieved remarkable success, and “Simple” would later become the focal point of several of Hughes' books and plays.

Hughes taught creative writing at Atlanta University and served as poet-in-residence at the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago. He co-wrote a play called *Mule Bone* with Zora Neale Hurston and contributed the lyrics for a Broadway musical entitled *Street Scene*, featuring music by Kurt Weill. The success of the musical would earn Hughes enough money to buy a house in Harlem.

Langston Hughes penned a remarkable collection of sixteen volumes of poetry, twelve novels and short stories, as well as eight children's books. His accolades encompassed prestigious recognitions like the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1934, the Rosenwald Fellowship in 1941, the Ainsfield-Wolf Book Award in 1954, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Spingarn Award in 1960.



DEATH AND LEGACY

On May 22, 1967, Langston Hughes died from complications of prostate cancer. As a tribute to his poetry, his funeral contained little in the way of spoken eulogy, but was filled with jazz and blues music, as Hughes requested. His ashes were interred beneath the entrance of the Arthur Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. The inscription marking the spot features a line from Hughes’s poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” It reads: “My soul has grown deep like the rivers.”

Hughes’ Harlem home on East 127th Street received New York City Landmark status in 1981 and was added to the National Register of Places in 1982. It is called the Langston Hughes House.