

Langston Hughes

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](#), [Carl Sandburg](#), and [Walt Whitman](#) 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 Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Unlike other notable black poets of the period—Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, and Countee Cullen—Hughes refused to differentiate between his personal experience and the common experience of black America. 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.