

LANGSTON HUGHES AND HIS POETRY

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Abstract: *Langston Hughes was a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance, the flowering of black intellectual, literary, and artistic life that took place in the 1920s in a number of American cities, particularly Harlem. A major poet, Hughes also wrote novels, short stories, essays, and plays. He sought to honestly portray the joys and hardships of working-class black lives, avoiding both sentimental idealization and negative stereotypes. As he wrote in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too."*

This approach was not without its critics. Much of Hughes's early work was roundly criticized by many black intellectuals for portraying what they thought to be an unattractive view of black life.

Keywords: *Langston Hughes, his poems, Hughes' greatness, The Return of Simple, Black Poets,*

Nevertheless, Hughes, more than any other black poet or writer, recorded faithfully the nuances of black life and its frustrations.

In Hughes's own words, his poetry is about "workers, roustabouts, and singers, and job hunters on Lenox Avenue in New York, or Seventh Street in Washington or South State in Chicago people up today and down tomorrow, working this week and fired the next, beaten and baffled, but determined not to be wholly beaten, buying furniture on the installment plan, filling the house with roomers to help pay the rent, hoping to get a new suit for Easter and pawning that suit before the Fourth of July."

Hughes brought a varied and colorful background to his writing. Before he was 12 years old he had lived in six different American cities. When his first book was published, he had already been a truck farmer, cook, waiter, college graduate, sailor, and doorman at a nightclub in Paris, and had visited Mexico, West Africa, the Azores, the Canary Islands, Holland, France, and Italy. As David Littlejohn observed in his *Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American*

Negroes: "On the whole, Hughes' creative life [was] as full, as varied, and as original as Picasso's, a joyful, honest monument of a career. There [was] no noticeable sham in it, no pretension, no self-deceit; but a great, great deal of delight and smiling irresistible wit. If he seems for the moment upstaged by angrier men, by more complex artists, if 'different views engage' us, necessarily, at this trying stage of the race war, he may well outlive them all, and still be there when it's over. Hughes' [greatness] [see picture 1] seems to derive from his anonymous unity with his people. He seems to speak for millions, which is a tricky thing to do.



Figure 1. Langston Hughes

A more recent collection, 1994's *The Return of Simple*, contains previously unpublished material but remains current in its themes, according to a *Publishers Weekly* critic who noted *Simple*'s addressing of such issues as political correctness, children's rights, and the racist undercurrent behind contraception and sterilization proposals. Donald C. Dickinson wrote in his *Bio-Bibliography of Langston Hughes* that "charm of *Simple* lies in his uninhibited pursuit of those two universal goals, understanding and security. As with most other humans, he usually fails to achieve either of these goals and sometimes once achieved they disappoint him. *Simple* has a tough resilience, however, that won't allow him to brood over a failure very long. *Simple* is a well-developed character, both believable and lovable. The situations he meets and discusses are so true to life everyone may enter the fun."

A reviewer for *Black World* commented on the popularity of *Simple*: "The people responded. *Simple* lived in a world they knew, suffered their pangs, experienced their joys, reasoned in their way, talked their talk, dreamed their dreams, laughed their laughs, voiced their fears and all the while underneath, he affirmed the wisdom which anchored at the base of their lives." Hoyt W. Fuller believed that, like *Simple*, "the key to Langston Hughes. was the poet's deceptive and profound simplicity. Profound because it was both willed and ineffable, because www.pedagoglar.org

some intuitive sense even at the beginning of his adulthood taught him that humanity was of the essence and that it existed undiminished in all shapes, sizes, colors and conditions. Violations of that humanity offended his unshakable conviction that mankind is possessed of the divinity of God."

It was Hughes's belief in humanity and his hope for a world in which people could sanely and with understanding live together that led to his decline in popularity in the racially turbulent latter years of his life. Unlike younger and more militant writers, Hughes never lost his conviction that "most people are generally good, in every race and in every country where I have been." Reviewing *The Panther and the Lash: Poems of Our Times* in *Poetry*, Laurence Lieberman recognized that Hughes's "sensibility [had] kept pace with the times," but he criticized his lack of a personal political stance. "Regrettably, in different poems, he is fatally prone to sympathize with starkly antithetical politics of race," Lieberman commented.

Until the time of his death, he spread his message humorously though always seriously to audiences throughout the country, having read his poetry to more people (possibly) than any other American poet. Hughes died on May 22, 1967, due to complications from prostate cancer.

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