



Langston Hughes

(1902-1967)

Life and works

James Mercer Langston Hughes was **one of the most prolific American writers of the 20th century**. Though internationally known as a poet, he expressed himself in a variety of literary forms. He was also a short-story writer (*The Ways of White Folks*, 1934, and *Laughing to Keep from Crying*, 1952); a novelist (*Not without Laughter*, 1930); the author of a two-volume autobiography (*The Big Sea*, 1940; *I Wonder As I Wander*, 1956) and of ten children's books in both verse and prose; a playwright (*Mulatto*, 1935); the editor of literary anthologies of American and African writers; the author of opera librettos and of lyrics for dramatic musicals (*Black Nativity*, 1962). He also wrote many radio and television scripts and songs. He published essays and articles on various subjects, and was a correspondent for the *Baltimore Afro-American* during the Spanish Civil War.

Born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902, he lived in many places. His earliest impressions were of Lawrence, Kansas, where his mother took him to live with his maternal grandmother when he was a year old. The two women deeply influenced his personality. His mother attempted to compensate for his father's absence – he had left the United States to go to Mexico – teaching the boy the things she liked: art, poetry and theatre. Growing up with his grandmother, Hughes **developed a sense of his ethnic heritage** from the stories she would tell him about the days of slavery. His teachers influenced and encouraged his reading, and in high school he began to keep two notebooks, one for his serious poems and another for jingles and light verse.

As time went by, his range of reading widened to include almost everything, from fiction to philosophy. He also began to send his poems to *The Crisis* and other periodicals that published them.

This, however, did not improve his **financial situation**: his most serious problem was the **difficulty** he had in **finding employment**. He finally got a job on a farm, and working at that common occupation made him feel spiritually close to Walt Whitman (→ 5.17), whose *Leaves of Grass* he was reading. At the age of 21 Hughes went to sea as a mess boy aboard a trading freight ship bound for Africa. He then went to Europe and lived in Paris, where he worked as a cook and a waiter. Back in the United States, he accepted a job as a busboy, clearing away dishes at the Wardman Park Hotel, Washington, DC. This decision proved most fortunate because it led to his meeting with the famous poet Vachel Lindsay (1879-1931) and his being introduced to the American public as a poet.

From that time on, Langston Hughes's **rise in the literary world** was steady. In 1925 he won his first prize with the poem *The Weary Blues*, and in 1926 he published his first collection bearing the same title. In 1927 a second

collection of poems appeared, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*.

In these years he received a scholarship and entered Lincoln University in Pennsylvania to complete his college education. He graduated in 1929. He contributed greatly to the Harlem Renaissance (→ 6.10) and in the 1930s he founded the Harlem Suitcase Theatre. In 1942 he published *Shakespeare in Harlem*, which is regarded as his best collection of poems.

He died in 1967. His will had been written four years earlier with detailed instructions about his funeral service. He did not want it to be held in a church with liturgical music but in a Harlem funeral house with a musical accompaniment by a jazz band.

Whitman's influence

Hughes recognised Walt Whitman's influence in a poem called *Old Walt*. Like Whitman, Hughes **wanted to share the common man's experience** and to become his spokesman. Both poets saw America as a nation in progress and approached the **writing** of their poems **in a non-traditional way**. Both were **free in the choice** of their **subjects** and wrote about matters traditionally thought unsuitable for poetry. Also, Whitman influenced Hughes in his **firm faith in the 'American dream'**.

The forms of many of Hughes's poems show his will to break down the rigid distinction between poetry and prose, though he did not go as far as Whitman in this direction. In writing poetry, Whitman and Hughes felt they were performing a function beyond mere entertainment and intended to change the world through it. This is why they **chose to speak through a mask**, an 'I', that was not individual, but collective. However, Hughes did not merge with the external world in general, but with his ethnic group, becoming the poet of the black masses.

The role of music

Hughes became a poet of the people, he organised poetry readings with jazz accompaniment. He **chose to go back to the roots of blackness**, to deal with its conflicts and contradictions, drawing from the folk tradition of the people: the spiritual as it was born in the South, and its modification into the blues under the influence of urban life. From slavery to freedom, music had served as an escape, an affirmation of the beauty of life. Then in the 1920s Louis Armstrong established the standard **jazz structure**, including solos and improvisation. Hughes came to regard this music as a **paradigm of the black experience** and a metaphor of human life in general. It was dynamic music, developing, moving. With its free and easy construction, its invitation to joy and the uninhibited movements of the body, jazz represented rebellion in a puritanical society, the vision of an alternative way of life.



Key idea

The question of black identity

Hughes was essentially an urban poet. Harlem sums up all his themes: a temple of jazz, a refuge of the black masses fleeing the South, a living incarnation of the great dream of freedom and equality in which the poet never ceased to believe.

As he developed his portrayal of the black lower classes as well as their ghetto environment, Hughes became more and more concerned with the question of racial identity. He first looked to Africa, which became a symbol of lost roots, of a distant

past that could not be retrieved, a myth which led the poet to an evaluation of his American roots.

Confronted with aesthetic categories in which black was traditionally charged with a negative connotation, Hughes exalted the colour of his skin and wrote: 'Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro – and beautiful.' Thus he expressed the strong will to preserve and exalt the characteristics of his people, together with the necessity for black writers to search for black aesthetics.



CULTURAL INSIGHT

Blues and jazz

The blues is deeply rooted in African-American history. It originated as an evolution from African spirituals and African chants in the late 19th century in the Southern plantations of the United States, where the black slaves sang while working in the cotton and vegetable fields. The blues deals with overcoming bad luck, getting rid of frustration or letting yourself go and simply having fun. The best blues has a cathartic effect and is absolutely emotional. The blues developed in the Mississippi Delta just upriver from New Orleans, the birthplace of jazz. Jazz too is rooted in the songs of African slaves. Jazz is partly planned and partly spontaneous: the musician performs a predetermined tune but he has the chance to create his own interpretations within that tune in response to the other musicians' performances or to the feeling 'in the moment'. Improvisation is the characterising feature of jazz. Blues and jazz have always influenced each other, and still interact in several ways today.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ about Hughes's life and works and summarise them using a factfile.

2 READ the rest of the text and answer the following questions.

- 1 What did Hughes and Whitman have in common?
- 2 How did they differ?
- 3 What did Hughes choose to deal with in his poetry?
- 4 What did he regard as a paradigm of the black experience? Why?
- 5 What did Harlem represent in his poetry?
- 6 How did he face the question of racial identity?



I, too, sing America

The poem was initially titled 'Epilogue' when it appeared in the collection The Weary Blues in 1926. It has been anthologised repeatedly as an example of Afro-American consciousness.

Langston Hughes
The Weary Blues
(1926)

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
5 But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

10 Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
'Eat in the kitchen,'
Then.

15 Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

READING COMPETENCE

1 READ the poem and find the words meaning the following.

- 1 guests
- 2 become
- 3 venture
- 4 furthermore

2 READ the poem again and do the following activities.

- 1 Hughes wrote the poem from
 - A an African-American man's perspective.
 - B a white American man's perspective.
 - C his own perspective.
 Can you guess the speaker's identity?
- 2 How does the lack of a concrete identity or historical context add to the poem?
- 3 The poem
 - A is written in free verse.
 - B has a rhyme scheme.
 - C is a ballad.
- 4 What does the speaker mean when he declares that he too can 'sing America'?
- 5 What common practice of racial segregation during the early 20th century do lines 3-4 allude to?



- 6 How does the speaker react?
- A He sinks into despair.
 - B He proclaims that the day after he will join the others at the table.
 - C He does not care.
- 7 What does line 16 imply about the speaker?
- A That he is excessively self-confident.
 - B That he is not ambitious.
 - C That he is proud of being black.
- 8 What belief is Hughes expressing in the poem as regards African Americans?

➤ **COMPETENCE: ESTABLISHING LINKS AND RELATIONSHIPS**

- 3 **DISCUSS.** Draw a comparison between Hughes's poem and Walt Whitman's poem, *I Hear America Singing* (→ Text Bank 47).