

Langston Hughes



Writer, Poet
Scott # 3557

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Stamp Artist: Henri Cartier-Bresson

Cross

*My old man's a white old man
And my old mother's black.
If ever I cursed my white old man
I take my curses back.
If ever I cursed my black old mother
And wished she were in hell,
I'm sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well
My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm going to die,
Being neither white nor black.*

Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902 in Joplin, Missouri. Langston's early years were spent at his grandmother's home in Lawrence, Kansas where she was an active participant in civil rights causes. (Her first husband was killed in John's Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry.) Langston became an eager listener during round table sessions at her home. His grandmother also encouraged him in his reading.

Langston lived with his mother in Lincoln, Illinois and Cleveland Ohio during his teen years. He graduated from high school in 1920 and then spent a year with his father in Mexico. He wrote his first published poem, The Negro Speaks of Rivers while riding on the train to Mexico. It was published in The Crisis, the official publication of the NAACP in 1921 and it became his best known poem.

Langston entered Columbia University in 1927 but dropped out after only a year. He spent some time in Harlem and then shipped as a steward aboard a tramp freighter sailing to West Africa and Europe.

Langston continued to write during this time and his works were published in The Crisis and the National Urban League's Opportunity. He returned to the United States in 1924 as an established poet. In 1925 he won first prize in Opportunity Magazine's poetry contest for The Weary Blues.

Langston was one of the leading figures in the Harlem Renaissance and was often referred to as the Poet Laureate of Harlem. His first novel, *Not Without Laughter* was published in 1930. Langston became active in political and social causes during the 1930s and traveled to the USSR, Haiti and Japan. He was the Madrid correspondent for a Baltimore newspaper during the Spanish Civil War.

Langston wrote a newspaper column for the *Chicago Defender* in the 1940s under the pseudonym of Jesse B. Semple (called Simple) who expressed the thoughts of Black Americans in street smart language. The character Simple became famous and was included in many of Langston's short stories.

Langston authored more than 50 books. These include *Weary Blues*, *The Dream keeper*, *Fields of Wonder*, *The Ways of White Folks*, *The Best of Simple*, *Not without Laughter*, *The Big Sea*, *I Wonder as I Wander*, and *Black Misery*.

Langston was also a prolific playwright. He wrote *Mulatto* in 1935 which was performed on Broadway over 370 times and in 1947 he wrote the Broadway musical *Street Scene*. In the 1960s he wrote two successful Gospel shows, *Black Nativity* and *Jericho-Jim Crow*.

Langston Hughes died on May 22, 1967 in New York City.

Sources:
Encyclopedia Britannica
Encyclopedia Africana

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