James Mercer Langston Hughes was born in 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. Shortly after his birth his parents divorced and Langston's father went to live in Mexico. Langston was moved from city to city as his mother searched for work. When he was eight years old, he went to live with his grandmother. She told him stories about Sojourner Truth, shared the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, and introduced him to the Crisis magazine, through which
he became acquainted with the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois. When Langston was twelve, his grandmother died and he went to live with family friends for two years. When his mother remarried, Langston rejoined his family in Lincoln, Illinois, and eventually moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where he attended Central High School.

After Hughes graduated from high school, he went to Mexico to visit his father. On his long journey, he traveled through the southern United States by train. As he crossed the Mississippi River, there was a beautiful sunset. This inspired him to write his famous poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” which he dedicated to W. E. B. Du Bois. He sent the poem to Jessie Redmon Fauset, literary editor of the Crisis, who published it in the magazine in 1921. Hughes spent fifteen months with his father, who promised to pay for his college education if he took up engineering. When he returned to the United States, he enrolled in Columbia University in New York. Although he earned good grades, with a B+ average, his heart was not in engineering. The following year he dropped out of Columbia, took a job as a steward on the SS Malone, and sailed for Africa. Hughes visited more than thirty ports including ones in Senegal, Nigeria, the Cameroons, Belgian Congo, Angola, and Guinea in Africa, then Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and France. He continued to write poetry and submit it to the Crisis.

When he returned to the United States in 1924, the Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age were in full swing. First he moved to Harlem, then on to Washington, D.C., in 1925. Hughes loved the new African-American sound and began to frequent jazz nightspots, where he listened to music and wrote poetry. “I tried to write poems like the songs they sang on Seventh Street... [these songs] had the pulse beat of the people who keep on going,” he said. Langston Hughes was the first writer to incorporate blues and jazz rhythms in his poetry. Some say his poems were written “to be read aloud, crooned, shouted, and sung.”
In 1925, Hughes's poetry was included in Alain Locke's anthology, *The New Negro*. On May 25 of that same year, Hughes was among the prizewinners at *Opportunity* magazine's annual literary competition. That night, when James Weldon Johnson read Langston’s poem “The Weary Blues,” it sparked the interest of Carl Van Vechten, who encouraged Alfred A. Knopf to publish Hughes’s first collection of poetry, also titled *The Weary Blues* (1926).

Hughes received a scholarship to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, where he completed his undergraduate degree in 1929. No matter where he lived he always returned to Harlem regularly. In 1926, he wrote his most famous essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in response to an essay written by the *Nation* editor George Schuyler. Schuyler did not believe that African-Americans had a distinct culture, separate and different from that of white Americans. Langston Hughes not only felt that black people had a unique culture, but that they should embrace and celebrate it in their art and music. Hughes frowned on African-American writers who took offense at being regarded as “Negro poets.” He wrote, “No great poet has ever been afraid of being himself.”

Hughes believed that the purest form of art came from the experience of the common man, his words and thoughts. But many of the Harlem elite had little appreciation for anything common. They could not see the value in celebrating their slave roots or their rural southern heritage. And they certainly did not care to make public the unique and private struggles of black folk. In November 1926, Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Hughes, and others published a new literary journal, *Fire!!* But the Harlem elite did not like its bold, revealing tone and refused to support the quarterly. Publication ended after the first issue.

Hughes met Charlotte Mason, the self-styled godmother of the Harlem Renaissance, while he was still a student at Lincoln University.
When she left him, she pressed a $50 bill into the palm of his hand and said, "A gift for a young poet." Mason became Hughes's patron, supporting him financially so that he could be free to write. That summer, instead of working the usual host of menial jobs, Hughes was free to complete his first novel, Not without Laughter, which was published in 1930. Throughout the 1930s, the prolific Hughes published poems, novels, and plays. In 1935, his play The Mulatto opened on Broadway. By this time, the Harlem Renaissance had ended. Hughes won a Guggenheim Fellowship and traveled to the Soviet Union, Haiti, Japan, and Spain. Like many African-Americans who were disappointed with their ongoing economic and social struggles, Hughes turned to communism.

In 1937 during the Spanish Civil War, he worked as a newspaper correspondent for the Baltimore Afro-American. In 1940, he penned an autobiography, The Big Sea. That same year he received the Rosenwald Fellowship. Langston Hughes wrote a total of sixteen books of poetry, two novels, three short story collections, four volumes of "editorial" and "documentary" fiction, twenty plays, children's poetry and nonfiction, musicals and operas, three autobiographies, a dozen radio and television scripts and dozens of magazine articles. In addition, he edited seven anthologies. No wonder he was considered the Poet Laureate of Harlem.

Hughes spent his later years writing, teaching, and mentoring other writers. He died of cancer in 1967. Since then, his home in Harlem has been designated a historical landmark, and the block where it is located was renamed Langston Hughes Place. The Langston Hughes Community Library and Cultural Center in Queens opened in 1969. It houses the largest circulating black heritage reading collection in New York City.
Langston Hughes

Writer
1902–1967

Langston Hughes’s father left home shortly after Langston’s birth in Joplin, Missouri. As a result, Hughes spent much of his childhood with his grandmother, Mary Langston. Mary’s first husband was Lewis Sheridan Leary, an abolitionist who was killed while fighting at Harpers Ferry. All Mary had to remember him by was the shawl he was wearing when he died. Often, she would wrap herself in the bloodstained, bullet-riddled cloth and tell young Langston stories about the lives of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and other freedom fighters.

Mother to Son

Well, son, I’ll tell you:
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.
It’s had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—Bare.
But all the time
I’ve been a-climbin’ on,
And reachin’ landin’s,
And turnin’ corners,
And sometimes goin’ in the dark
Where there ain’t been no light.
So boy, don’t you turn back.
Don’t you set down on the steps
Cause you finds it’s kinder hard.
Don’t you fall now—
For I’s still goin’, honey,
I’m still climbin’,
And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.

Sometimes at night, she would tenderly wrap the shawl around him as he slept. From these childhood memories came the strong African-American pride that later flowed through all of Hughes’s writing.

At thirteen, Hughes started reading the poetry of Claude McKay, Carl Sandburg, and Walt Whitman. Following their example, he began to compose his own poetry. At nineteen, his poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” was published in the Crisis, one of the most influential African-American magazines in the country. In it, he affirms his link to his African heritage. Originally scribbled on the back of an old envelope, the poem was to become one of his most famous.

In 1921, Hughes enrolled at Columbia University in New York City. Although he did well at Columbia, he was more interested in Harlem, where African-American music, theater, art, and literature were flourishing during the Harlem Renaissance. Leaving college after only one year, he took several menial jobs and then signed on as a sailor on an old freighter.

Life on board ship suited Hughes, and he wrote poems after poem. After traveling to Africa and Europe, he jumped ship and lived for a while in Paris, where he spent hours listening to the black musicians who had moved there to work. Back in the United States, he continued to frequent the nightclubs where African-American musicians performed and to visit storefront churches. Hughes was caught up in the rhythms of the sermons, spirituals, and hymns: “Like the waves of the sea coming one after another . . . so is the undertow of black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of the human heart, its humor and its rooted power.”

In 1924, Hughes moved to Washington, D.C., where he got a job as a busboy at the Wardman Park Hotel. When he found that poet Vachel Lindsay was staying at the Wardman, he arranged to show him some of his poems. Lindsay was so impressed that he read Hughes’s poems to an audience that night. The response was overwhelming, and Hughes was invited to do his own reading.
Hughes’s first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, was published in 1926. The same year, he enrolled at Lincoln University near Philadelphia, graduating in 1929. While in school, he still found time to write poetry. Some African-American critics felt his second book, published in 1927, glorified immorality and showed African-Americans in a bad light. Hughes defended himself, saying, “I have the right to portray any side of Negro life I wish to... every ‘ugly’ poem I write is a protest against the ugliness it pictures.”

Hughes’s first novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930), was an immediate success. During this time, Hughes traveled widely and spent a year in Russia. After returning home, he wrote a number of short stories that were collected in *The Ways of White Folks* (1934).

Three years later, as a newspaper correspondent, Hughes covered the Spanish civil war. When he returned home, he established the Harlem Suitcase Theatre. Its opening production—his own one-act play, *Don’t You Want to Be Free?*—was a huge success. He later founded two other theaters, one in Los Angeles and another in Chicago.

In 1934, Hughes began writing a regular news column in which he presented the shrewd, humorous views of an African-American man named Jesse B. Semple, or “Simple.” The Simple Stories, later collected into five books, are now considered to be among his best work.

In all of his writing, Hughes celebrated ordinary African-American working people. He liked them, felt at ease with them, and respected them. His work is notable for both its quality and its quantity. Over the years, he wrote not only poetry, but also plays, novels, children’s books, short stories, histories, biographies, radio and TV scripts, and his own autobiography. Known as the “Poet Laureate of Harlem,” Hughes is primarily considered a poet. Often humorous, sometimes militant, occasionally subdued, his writing mirrored his observations, his beliefs and, most of all, his hopes.

**Alain Leroy Locke**

**Philosopher, Educator, Writer**

1885–1954

Since his parents were both school-teachers, it is not surprising that Alain Locke was an excellent student. He graduated *magna cum laude* (with highest honors) from Harvard University after just three years. In 1907, he became the first African-American to be awarded a Rhodes Scholarship to study in England. He also studied at the University of Berlin in Germany. This was particularly important because it came at a time when many whites were trying to prove that African-Americans were inferior intellectually, and segregation was therefore necessary.

Locke returned to the United States in 1911, and a year later he began teaching at Howard University in Washington, D.C. After receiving his Ph.D. from Harvard, he became chairman of Howard’s philosophy department. In 1924, Locke traveled to Egypt. When he returned to Howard, he found an ongoing dispute about faculty salaries and other issues. Because of the complaints, Locke and several other professors were dismissed in June 1925. His firing resulted in many protests from alumni and others, and he was later reinstated.

That same year, Locke was asked to edit a special issue of a magazine called *Survey Graphic*. He took the opportunity to highlight the work of
Langston Hughes was a poet with the genius to set his mellifluous voice to music—both literally and figuratively. A prolific novelist and playwright as well, Hughes used verse to illustrate Black urban life and attack social injustice.

Langston Hughes wrote poetry from the time he was a child. His devastatingly observant yet sorrowful examinations of African-American life in Harlem, and the Black experience in general, are considered to be some of the most powerful writings of the 20th century. One of Hughes's most famous poems, "I, Too, Sing America," is a powerful plea to the country to recognize and accept Blacks on the basis of their myriad contributions. He was mentor to a generation of writers. Hughes was one of the most important voices of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, and of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Happiness lives nowhere.
Some old folk said,
If not within oneself.

That line, from Hughes's poem "I Thought It Was Tangiers I Wanted," speaks volumes about the life of a man whose travels took him to some of the world's most exotic places, including Mexico, Spain, and Africa. Born in February of 1902, Hughes had already lived in seven cities in the U.S. and Mexico by the time he was 12. The handsome writer had been class poet in grammar school and he didn't lay down his pen throughout his life. For several years after school he traveled, teaching and working as a servant. Then in 1924, writer and critic Vachel Lindsay "discovered" Hughes. He dubbed him the "bus boy poet."

In 1926, Hughes published his first book of poetry, The Weary Blues, followed by several volumes remarkable for the musical nature of the language. In later works, Hughes sometimes gave directions for musical accompaniment to his verses, making him one of the earliest
writers to combine the two forms. One of Hughes’s plays, *Mulatto* (1935), had a successful run on Broadway in New York. In the 1940s, Hughes created Jesse B. Simple, a fictional character in Hughes’s *Chicago Defender* column, who represented the lives and racial consciousness of the Black working class.

In all, Hughes published more than ten volumes of poetry, a little over 60 dramas, and scores of operas, anthologies of other Black writers, and two autobiographies. During the 1930s, Hughes took aim at civil rights and economic issues. Ten years later, Hughes took his genius for observation and his talent for relating to the working class to several universities. He taught at Atlanta University, then he was poet-in-residence at the University of Chicago’s Laboratory School. In the 1960s, Hughes turned out an incredible volume of material, including *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961), and his last volume of poetry, *The Panther and the Lash* (1967).

Hughes, considered by many to be the “poet laureate of Harlem,” died of congestive heart failure in New York in March 1967.

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**ZORA NEALE HURSTON**

Zora Neale Hurston was a major contributor to the Harlem Renaissance. She was also an anthropologist, playwright, novelist, and feminist who never achieved true fame in her lifetime because she was an outspoken, proud Black woman.

Critics and readers alike marvel at the woman we’ve come to know as Zora Neale Hurston. A writer, anthropologist, and eccentric personality who reigned during the 1920s and 1930s, Hurston created a stir just about every time she appeared in public.

Always outspoken, flamboyant, and colorful, Hurston never backed down from anyone—friend or foe. She spoke her mind and she wrote with the sameferocious clarity. In doing so, she created a legion of fans who have
Chapter 2

Growing Up in Kansas

Early in the twentieth century, Joplin, Missouri, was a booming town where men came to work in the lead mines. It was in Joplin that James Langston Hughes was born February 1, 1902, to James and Carrie Hughes. James had been working as a bookkeeper for a mining company. The name the child would be known as for the rest of his life was his middle name (after his mother’s maiden name): Langston. Although less than three years old by the time of Langston’s birth, the Hughes marriage was already in trouble. James and Carrie could not have been any more different.

Carolyn Mercer Langston, known as Carrie, grew up as the only daughter of Charles and Mary Langston in the progressive town of Lawrence in the new Kansas Territory. When Kansas Territory opened for settlement in 1854, the laws of the time dictated that settlers could decide whether to admit their territory as a slave state or a free state. Abolitionists rushed in and started the town of Lawrence in an effort to make Kansas into a free state. Lawrence became an important stop on the Underground Railroad, helping slaves reach freedom.

Carrie, who was popular in school, enjoyed performing in front of others. Encouraged by her father, she read her own poems for the Kansas Inter-State Literary Society while she was a high school student. Before she graduated from high school, her father died. Money had never meant much to the politically active Charles Langston, an important civic leader in Lawrence, but after he died, money became tight. Charles left a heavily mortgaged home to his wife and daughter. Carrie worked as a clerk in the district court to help support herself.
and her mother. The strain became worse as she and her mother began fighting. Carrie enjoyed going out and having fun. She especially loved musical theater and hoped to be an actress one day. Mary Langston believed that music other than hymns was shameful. She said the same about theater and novels. Carrie wanted to leave her mother’s home.

After taking a teaching course at Kansas State Normal School in Emporia, Carrie traveled south to Oklahoma Territory in 1898. She was to teach at a school in the territorial capital of Guthrie. With the recent land run in Oklahoma Territory, many towns, including Guthrie, had been settled in a single day. Carrie was excited to be living only twelve miles away from what the New York Times called a "black mecca." Founded in 1890, the town of Langston, named after Carrie’s uncle John, was planned as an all-African American town. It was the center of African American culture for the area. After settlers bought land for a school, the Presbyterian Church opened the Colored Agricultural and Normal University in 1898. It would be renamed Langston University, and today it is a leader in agricultural research.

It was in Langston that Carrie met an ambitious storekeeper named James Nathaniel Hughes. James’s father had fought in the Civil War and was a successful farmer in Charlestown, Indiana, until his death when James was sixteen. His two brothers had been respected Buffalo Soldiers with the all-African American regiments that safeguarded the frontier. Both of James’s grandfathers were white men from Kentucky. Interracial relationships were common in the late nineteenth century. Biracial children from these unions had the same limited rights that other African Americans did at the time. Most likely this treatment contributed to James’s bitter and unhappy outlook on life.

Only two years older than Carrie, James had already worked as a teacher, law clerk, farmer, and homesteader. What he really wanted to be was a lawyer. He had studied the law, but as an African American, he was prohibited from taking the bar exam in most places, including Oklahoma Territory. Angry at the unfair system, James spoke against poor minorities, particularly African Americans. He seemed to believe that poor people brought on their unfortunate circumstances. In Langston Hughes, Before and Beyond Harlem, author Faith Berry writes of Langston’s father: "In his father’s oft-spoken opinion, blacks had only themselves to blame for their dismal poverty and powerlessness."¹

James and Carrie married in Guthrie on April 30, 1899, with no family present. A few months later, a pregnant Carrie and her husband moved to Joplin to find a job James could be happy with. The infant died soon after birth. Husband and wife moved to Buffalo, New York, for a while, but returned to Joplin while Carrie was pregnant with Langston. James Hughes’s frustration mounted as he decided he would never get the opportunities he deserved in the United States. He talked about moving to Cuba, where he had heard that African Americans were treated fairly. He may have gone there for a short time, but soon after Langston’s birth, he moved to Mexico City, where he worked as a confidential secretary to the general manager of the Pullman Train Company.

For the first years of his life, Langston moved from place to place with his mother. They lived with Mary Langston in Lawrence, then with his aunt Sarita in Indianapolis for a while. They lived in New York and Colorado. When necessary, Langston lived with his grandmother in Lawrence. Soon after turning five or six, he lived in Mexico City as his parents tried to reconcile. A major earthquake hit the city. For Carrie, this was the last straw, and she immediately left for the United States with Langston. James remained in Mexico. The marriage was over, and Langston wouldn’t see his father again for eleven years.

Langston remembered living in Topeka, Kansas, when he was six years old. He and his mother rented a room over a plumbing shop in the white business district. Money was scarce, and Langston remembered his mother being angry at his father for leaving her with a child to raise alone. Langston contributed by searching the alleys and streets for wooden boxes to take home. Carrie would break up the boxes to burn in the stove they used for heating and cooking.

It wasn’t all hardships, though. Langston later recalled being introduced to two things in Topeka that changed his life forever: music and the public library. "In Topeka, as a small child, my mother took me with her to the little vine-covered library on the rounds of the Capitol. There I first fell in love with librarians, and I have been in love with them ever since—those very nice women who help you find wonderful books!"²

Langston was excited when it finally came time to enter first grade. Although the closest school to their home was Harrison Street School, it welcomed only white students. Carrie was told to go across town and enroll her son in Washington School. She argued that the school for African Americans was too far away for a six-year-old to walk to while she was at work. She appealed to the school board and won. Langston was allowed to enroll in the Harrison Street School. Interestingly, one of the most important battles for school integration would be fought fifty years later with the Topeka School Board.
Chapter 2

As the only African American student at the school, Langston occasionally endured cruel comments from students, and even from a teacher. Langston said in his first autobiography, *The Big Sea*, that "all the teachers were nice to me, except one who sometimes used to make remarks about my being colored. And after such remarks, occasionally the kids would grab stones and tin cans out of the alley and chase me home."³

Langston was a bright child and a model student. When April rolled around, Carrie pulled him from Harrison Street School and moved him to Lawrence, Kansas, to live with his grandfather. "And my mother, who worked, always traveled about a great deal, looking for a better job," he wrote. Although he would live with his mother briefly in Colorado and Kansas City, the remainder of his early childhood was spent in Lawrence with Mary Sampson Patterson Leary Langston.

The only thing stable in young Langston's life was his grandmother. Almost seventy when her grandson was born, Mary Langston took after her Native American ancestors with her copper skin and long black hair. Born as a free woman in North Carolina, her heritage included African American, French, and Cherokee. She met her first husband, Lewis Sheridan Leary, at Oberlin College. Together, they helped people escape to the North through the Underground Railroad. Operated by abolitionists and free African Americans, the Underground Railroad was a way of helping slaves escape to the North. It wasn't really a railroad. People used railroad terms as code words. For example, people like Mary and her husband were called conductors. The Underground Railroad may have helped up to 100,000 people escape slavery. It also inspired the revolutionary book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Written by American abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a best-selling novel about slavery that influenced other abolitionists. The character of Uncle Tom was that of an obedient African American slave. The popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* continued on stage. Langston called it the "most cussed and discussed book of its time."⁵

Without telling Mary, Leary joined abolitionist John Brown in an attack on the federal armory at Harpers Ferry in Virginia (now part of West Virginia). He was shot dead. Langston later wrote about the stories his grandmother told about her first husband. "My grandmother said Sheridan Leary always did believe people should be free."⁶ Mary kept the shawl in which Leary died close to her for the rest of her life. Sometimes she used the shawl—with its bullet holes—to cover young Langston. When Langston was eight years old, his grandmother took him to Osawatomie, Kansas, on the last day of August for the dedication of the John Brown Memorial Battlefield. Former President Theodore Roosevelt honored her as the last surviving widow from the Harpers Ferry incident.

In 1869, after ten years as a widow, Mary married Charles Langston, son of a prosperous white plantation owner and a former slave who worked recruiting African Americans for the 54th and 55th Massachusetts regiments in the Civil War. Although it was illegal for them to do so, Charles's parents lived as husband and wife, and they had three sons: Gideon, Charles, and John Mercer. In the same year that Sheridan Leary participated in John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry, Charles, who was also an abolitionist, was arrested for helping a runaway slave escape to Canada. At his trial, Charles spoke against the Fugitive Slave Law, which made it illegal to help people escape from slavery. "Let me stand in that Hall, and tell a United States Marshal that my father was a Revolutionary soldier; that he served under Lafayette, and fought through the whole war; and that he always told me that he fought for my freedom as much as for his own; and he would sneer at me, and clutch me with his bloody fingers, and say he had a right to make me a slave! And when I appeal to Congress, they say he has a right to make me a slave; when I appeal to the people, they say he has a right to make me a slave, and when I appeal to your Honor, your Honor says he has a right to make me a slave, and if any man, white or black, seeks an investigation of that claim, they make themselves amenable to the pains and penalties of the Fugitive Slave Act, for BLACK MEN HAVE NO RIGHTS WHICH WHITE MEN ARE BOUND TO RESPECT."⁷

The judge found Charles's speech so moving that he reduced his sentence from six months in jail with a $1,000 fine to twenty days in jail and a $100 fine.

John Mercer Langston also worked against slavery. According to Hughes biographer Arnold Rampersad, "Adding to Charles Langston's prestige was the fame of his youngest brother; John Mercer Langston was one of the three [with Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington] best known black Americans.⁸ With three college degrees, John Mercer Langston was a lawyer who prided himself on breaking down the walls of discrimination. He was appointed to many offices, including serving as a law professor and president of Howard University in Washington, D.C. In 1890, John was elected to Congress from Virginia. He became the first African American elected to Congress from Virginia and served from 1890 to 1891.

Langston came from a family that prized education. Both his maternal grandparents studied at Oberlin College. Mary Langston was one of the first
African American women to attend the Ohio college. She read to her grandson from the Bible and from Grimm's Fairy Tales. But most of her stories were about courageous people working for freedom for enslaved African Americans through the Underground Railroad and at Harpers Ferry. Langston's grandmother made certain he knew that he came from great people and that great things were expected from him also. What he learned was that nobody cried in his grandmother's stories. According to Rampersad, Langston learned at an early age that there was no point to crying.

Hughes remembered his grandmother taking him as a young child to Topeka, Kansas, to hear "the greatest colored man in the world," educator Booker T. Washington, speak before a packed auditorium. Washington, a former slave, had established the Tuskegee Institute in 1881. He was perhaps the best-known African American man in the country at the time.

Langston's childhood among dominant women affected his life and his writing. In his first novel, Not Without Laughter, his main character, Sandy, was also raised by his grandmother in a small Kansas town.

Mary Langston had lived in the same house since 1888, but after twenty years, the racial makeup began to change in Lawrence. Segregation became a way of life in the once progressive Kansas town. The church she had attended for years began admitting only white people. Instead of fighting the decision or finding another church, she stayed at home and read her Bible. Soon her home was one of only a few African American homes in her neighborhood, located near the University of Kansas. She made Langston come straight home from school, rarely allowing him playtime in their white neighborhood.

Mary Langston didn't have much money. She refused to work as a servant for white people, one of the few jobs available to elderly African American women. Sometimes she made money by renting out her home and living with friends. The salt pork and dandelion greens that made up many of their meals wasn't very filling for a growing boy.

His grandmother was a proud and dignified woman, but she didn't seem to be very affectionate with her grandson. Langston, who was lonely, needed love. He often wished for his mother to come and take him away. She made rare appearances, but always returned him to his grandmother. Langston remembered going to Kansas City with his mother and hearing the blues for the very first time. He and his mother also shared a love for the theater. Langston particularly enjoyed seeing the stage version of Uncle Tom's Cabin.
Chapter 3

Northern Migration

Carrie arrived in Lawrence to attend her mother’s funeral with her new husband, Homer Clark, and her two-year-old stepson, Gwyn. Langston was thrilled to finally have a little brother and quickly took to the young boy, whom they all called Kit. After attending the funeral of Mary Langston, it looked as if Langston might finally be getting the family he had always wanted—but then Homer Clark left town. A former cook from Topeka, Clark decided to look for work in Chicago. Although Langston liked his new stepfather and even called him Dad, leaving his family to look for work was a pattern reminiscent of his own mother. Carrie and Kit soon followed Clark to Illinois. It is not clear why, but Langston did not go with them.

Did Langston feel hurt that his new family left him in Lawrence so soon after his grandmother’s death? He was only thirteen years old. He doesn’t say much about his feelings in his autobiographies. Those who knew Langston best believed he never shared his deepest feelings in his autobiographies. Better clues about his feelings regarding his childhood are found in his poetry and in his novel, Not Without Laughter. Biographer Rampersad wrote of Langston, “In some respects, he grew up a motherless and a fatherless child, who never forgot the hurts of his childhood.”

Langston stayed in Lawrence with family friends, the Reeds. He and his grandmother had stayed with them many times when Mary Langston had rented out her home. Langston liked James and Mary Reed, who lavished love and attention on the boy. He wrote in The Big Sea, “. . . there have never been
any better people in the world. I loved them very much.”2 The childless Auntie and Uncle Reed owned their home, which included a small farm. Langston did chores, from taking the cows to pasture to helping with the garden. After years of living with little money to buy food, now he had as much to eat as he wanted. The only thing Auntie Reed asked of him was that he accompany her on Sundays to St. Luke’s African Methodist Episcopal Church two blocks away. She was a very religious woman who believed God would take care of Langston. The boy, however, was uncomfortable at church; this was a feeling he would carry with him throughout his life. When he attended a revival with Auntie Reed, he watched as children all around him were converted. Standing alone, with her hopeful eyes upon him, Langston stepped forward, pretending to also be converted. He felt overwhelming guilt and cried himself to sleep that night.

Langston started what he thought of as his first real job at a hotel for white guests. After school each day, he cleaned brass spittoons, mirrors, toilets, halls, and the lobby. It was a job his grandmother would have felt was beneath him, but Langston enjoyed earning fifty cents a week. He used his earnings to go to the theater and watch silent actors like Charlie Chaplin on the movie screen. One day, the movie theater put up a sign that said No Colored Allowed. Signs refusing service to African Americans were going up all over Lawrence. Langston began watching live theater at the Bowersock Opera House instead. Although also owned by whites, the Bowersock allowed African Americans to sit in a separate section. Langston sat in the gallery, often by himself, and watched plays and shows. He also attended nearby college football games on Saturday afternoons, where he rooted for the hometown University of Kansas Jay Hawks.

Although the Reeds gave Langston a sense of security and family that had been missing in his earlier years, he felt like a child no one wanted. He carried this feeling with him throughout his life, as his mother’s interest in him ranged from nothing to a strong financial and emotional dependence upon him. Even so, he was lonely for his mother. He later remembered, “When I went to live with Auntie Reed, whose house was near the depot, I used to walk down to the Santa Fe station and stare at the railroad tracks, because the railroad tracks ran to Chicago, and Chicago was the biggest town in the world to me, much talked of by the people in Kansas.” It was also where his mother was.

By the summer of 1918, Langston’s mother had him join them in Lincoln, Illinois. Not far from Chicago, Lincoln was the first town in the United States named after Abraham Lincoln. Biographer Rampersad wrote that the town of

12,000 would be significant in another way too: He would write his first poetry there.

As before, Langston was a brilliant student who got along well with others at Lincoln’s Central School. He and one girl were the only African Americans in his eighth-grade class. Interestingly, it was perhaps because he was African American that he was introduced to poetry. His classmates chose him as class poet. Langston said, “In America most white people think, of course, that all Negroes can sing and dance, and have a sense of rhythm. So my classmates, knowing that a poem had to have rhythm, elected me unanimously—thinking, no doubt, that I had some, being a Negro. It never occurred to me to be a poet before, or indeed a writer of any kind.”

The only poems Langston remembered liking as a child were the African American dialect poems by Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Dunbar was one of the earliest African American poets to use the exaggerated accents and colorful expressions of dialects. Langston also liked Hiawatha by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. He preferred reading novels and read anything his mother brought home from the public library. His favorite authors included Edna Ferber and western writer Zane Grey. Riders of the Purple Sage was a favorite book.

Langston began class poems with verses in appreciation of the school’s eight teachers. The second half referred to how great their eighth-grade graduating class of eighty students was. Langston read the poem at the graduation and received much applause. His stepfather missed the graduation; Clark had left again. Soon after graduation, Langston and the rest of the family joined Clark in Cleveland, Ohio.

World War I had started and the Industrial Revolution was going strong. The change in industry marked a huge migration of African Americans from the South to the North, where more jobs were available. From 1910 to 1920, the African American population of Cleveland doubled. Homer Clark found a decent paying job in a steel mill. When he could no longer stand the heat of the furnaces, he got a job as a building caretaker, and later as a janitor. Rents were high, even for their basement apartment, so Carrie began working as a maid.

Cleveland was the eighth city he had lived in, but Langston loved it. According to Rampersad, “For Hughes, his arrival marked the first satisfaction of what would be his lifelong passion for cities; the older he became, the less tolerant he grew of the country.”

Central High School in Cleveland was founded in 1846, making it the oldest high school in Ohio. It became significant to Langston as the only high school he
would attend. Although his mother and stepfather continued to move around, Langston was determined to finish his education at Central. The school enjoyed a good reputation as one of the best public schools. It had turned out successful graduates, including millionaire John D. Rockefeller. Yet by the time Langston enrolled in school, white Americans were moving away from the inner city and being replaced with recent immigrants. Many students at Central were the children of parents born in countries like Hungary, Italy, or Russia. His best friend’s family came from Poland. Langston and the fair-haired Sartur Andrezewskis remained friends throughout the four years.

As usual, Langston was one of few African Americans attending the school. With his likable personality, he was popular with students and teachers. During his freshman year, he studied graphic arts and thought he might be a draftsman someday. After school, he worked in Mrs. Kitzmiller’s store, selling ice cream and watermelon to people who arrived daily from the South. He worked in a department store during the summer. He watched in amazement as people spent what would amount to six months’ rent for his family just for one gold cigarette lighter.

Langston started his sophomore year at Central only to see Clark leave the family for Chicago again. When his mother and Kit followed, Langston took an attic room and lived on his own. He was determined to continue his schooling. He ate a lot of hot dogs and white rice because these were the only things he knew how to cook. Sometimes his friend’s family, the Andrezejewskis, took pity on him and invited him over for a Polish dinner of cabbage.

Langston also met Russell and Rowena Jeffers, a young white couple dedicated to community service work in Cleveland. They established the first African American theater, Karamu House, around the corner from Langston’s first Cleveland home. He liked that their purpose was to promote interracial harmony. Langston was one of the first children to attend the community center, where he took art classes. Soon, he was teaching art to children at the “Playground House.” For Langston, the Jeffers became his home away from home. He began spending more time at their house, where he could relax.

An honor student, Langston joined the track team during his sophomore year. He also began submitting poetry to the school’s monthly magazine, the Belfry Owl. His first serious effort, “The Red Cross Nurse,” was a popular choice during wartime. He soon began publishing regularly in the magazine. Even more importantly, his English teacher, Ethel Weimer, introduced him to the works of what would be his greatest influences, Carl Sandburg and Walt Whitman.

Whitman helped him understand the self-respect that the common man possessed. Langston called Sandburg his guiding star and even wrote a poem dedicated to him. In The Big Sea, he would explain: “Little Negro dialect poems like Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s and poems without rhyme like Sandburg’s were the first real poems I tried to write.”

With his life going fairly well in Cleveland, Langston visited his family that summer in Chicago. It was an uncomfortable summer in their crowded room, which was located near the elevated railway known as the El. Clark had taken off again, and Carrie was working for a hat maker. She got Langston a job delivering the hats. Most of Langston’s deliveries were in white neighborhoods. One day a gang of white boys beat him up. When it was time to return to school, his mother wanted him to remain in Chicago. Unlike her own parents, Carrie Clark felt that her son would be more useful if he quit school and got a job. “My mother, as a great many poor mothers do, seemed to have the fixed idea that a son is born for the sole purpose of taking care of his parents as soon as possible,” Langston explained. Living alone during his sophomore year had given Langston the confidence to refuse his mother. He knew the importance of an education, even if she didn’t. He happily left Chicago for Cleveland to begin his junior year.

At the beginning of the school year, Langston joined the staff of the Belfry Owl. He continued writing poetry and also wrote some short stories. His first short story, titled “Those Who Have No Turkey,” was published in the school paper in December. It is the story of fifteen-year-old Diane Jordan, visiting her well-off aunt in the city for Thanksgiving. When she meets a newsboy whose family is too poor to buy a turkey, she invites him and his family to her aunt’s. After Christmas, students saw Langston’s name often in The Belfry Owl. The school’s literary magazine published many of his poems. In his first autobiography, Langston wrote that it was during the 1918–1919 school year that he first began thinking about being a writer.

Langston stayed busy during the school year. Perhaps it helped ward off the loneliness he felt as a sixteen-year-old boy living alone. He was proud of his achievements in track, lettering in the high jump and the 440 relay. He was also active in the student council, French Club, and American Civic Association. According to Langston, most of the students in his school were either Catholic or Jewish. Because neither group wanted to vote for the other, Langston held many class offices as a compromise between the Catholic and Jewish students of the school.
His first date was attending the symphony with a Jewish girl. Although his best friend was Catholic, he found it easier to get to know the Jewish students, many of whose families came from Eastern Europe. Langston and his fellow students heard about the Russian Revolution of 1917 when the Russian people overthrew the czarist government and installed a socialist government. Langston began reading borrowed socialist magazines like the Liberator. The more Langston heard about this theory of government, which emphasized collective ownership, the more he suspected that socialist governments were less racist toward African Americans.

Although he was generally happy at Central High School, problems did come up. His high school class went on a field trip to hear opera legend Sara Bernhardt sing. Afterward, they went across the street to eat at the cafeteria. The cashier rang up Sartur’s food, which amounted to forty-five or fifty cents. When it was Langston’s turn, he said she took one look at this face and then kept hitting the cash register keys. Although he had the same food as Sartur, his bill came to $8.65. When he asked why it was so high, the cashier told him that that was how much it would cost him to eat at the cafeteria. An upset Langston left. He later called the incident “my most humiliating Jim Crow experience.”

Langston’s mother and stepbrother returned to Cleveland. Clark also returned briefly. Langston’s biggest surprise came late in the school year when he received a letter from his father. It was short and to the point. James Hughes wrote to say that he was coming to take Langston to Mexico for the summer. Carrie was furious and didn’t want Langston to go. “I said I wanted to go to Mexico for the summer to see what the country was like—and my father. Then I would be back in the fall,” he wrote.

Langston’s mind was full of the man he hadn’t seen for eleven years. His only memory of his father was his strong arms cradling Langston as he carried him out of the hotel in Mexico City during the earthquake that had sent Carrie fleeing back to the United States. Langston looked forward to meeting his father again. Maybe he would finally feel like he belonged somewhere.

His mother refused to see him off. Furthermore, she wouldn’t write to him during the entire summer. Through a mixup, he was late in meeting his father at the train station. James Hughes only questioned where he had been. Although it had been eleven years, Langston noticed that his father never said he was glad to see him. The long train ride gave the young man plenty of time to get to know his father. It is likely that Langston realized what an unlikely person his father was before they ever arrived in Mexico.

James Hughes was a small, angry man whose only goal in life seemed to be to gain wealth. When he left the United States to explore opportunities in Spanish-speaking countries, he tried various things, including practicing law in Mexico. When the Mexican Revolution of 1910 started, many white Americans fled the country. Their departure opened more opportunities for Hughes. By the time of Langston’s visit, his father was managing an electric light company and had acquired a ranch and rental property in Mexico City. He was doing quite well, but it seemed the more money he earned, the less he liked parting with it. It had been one of the things he had fought about with his wife. Carrie enjoyed money too, but she wanted to spend it.

Almost as strong as James Hughes’s desire for money was his hatred of poor nonwhite people. He admired the growing German community in Mexico, but spoke contemptuously about African Americans and Mexicans. “My father hated Negroes. I think he hated himself, too, for being a Negro,” Langston revealed. “He disliked all of his family because they were Negroes and remained in the United States.”

Langston and his father got off the train in Mexico City. They stayed briefly at the Grand Hotel and checked on his properties, managed by the three Patiño sisters, Cuca, Fela, and Lola. The three women seemed to be the only people who truly liked James Hughes.

Mexico was known for its bullfights, and Langston had been looking forward to seeing one himself. However, his father was in a hurry to return home to Tolua. They boarded another train for the short trip west of Mexico City. The train wound through the mountains, climbing higher and higher to reach Tolua, located in a green valley with lakes and a view of the snow-capped volcano known as La Nevada de Tolua.

They disembarked at the Tolua train station and walked the short distance to Hughes’s home. A high adobe wall surrounded the house and a corral that held horses and chickens. Instead of showing his son the sights of central Mexico, Hughes quickly put Langston to work learning bookkeeping. Langston told his father that he wasn’t much good at math, which infuriated James. He yelled at Langston for not having a good head for business. As Langston soon learned, his father frequently yelled. He often yelled at his son and his two servants to “hurry up.” James Hughes was always in a hurry, and he expected those around him to hurry also.

His father often worked away from home. Langston spent free time with Maximiliano, an Indian boy who was his father’s servant. After Maximiliano
taught Langston how to handle a horse, Langston would ride a black horse named Tito to nearby villages. Hughes’s other servant was a cook who was limited to making the same beef and beans each day. Hughes refused to spend extra money for food. When his father went out of town on business, Langston ordered lots of good food from the local shops. He told the storekeepers to put it on his father’s bill. When he returned, James Hughes was very angry. He berated his son and told him he was just like his mother. Regardless, the household ate well while the food lasted. James Hughes was not about to waste food.

Langston learned to speak and read Spanish in his free time. His knowledge of Spanish helped when he attended the Sunday movies in the village. Most of the time, he was bored and unhappy. He sank into a depression. His father was not the man he had hoped he would be.

Langston fell ill in August. His stomach hurt, and he couldn’t eat. He also ran a high fever. When he didn’t get any better, the local doctor recommended that he be admitted to the hospital. Hughes took Langston to the American Hospital in Mexico City, where he was diagnosed with a stomach infection. Langston had a different diagnosis: “But I never told them or the doctors that I was sick because I hated my father.”

It took several weeks for Langston to recover. When he found out it was costing his father twenty dollars a day for the hospital, Langston took his time getting better. As soon as he was well enough, he boarded the train to Cleveland. “That summer in Mexico was the most miserable I have ever known,” he wrote. “I did not hear from my mother for several weeks. I did not like my father. And I did not know what to do about either of them.”

World War I ended just before Langston returned to America. Although the battles overseas had ended, new fighting was just beginning in America as racially charged riots broke out in many cities. As had happened in Lawrence, Cleveland businesses began refusing to admit African Americans. African Americans were fired from jobs that were then given to the white soldiers returning home.

Langston helped his mother make ends meet by working in a dining room in a Cleveland hotel. She was still angry with him for visiting his father. She told him she was looking forward to this being Langston’s last year of high school, because she expected him to start working right after graduation and be of some use to her. No doubt Langston stayed away from home as much as possible. He became a frequent visitor to the Cleveland Public Library. The children’s services director, Effie Power, encouraged the young student. Her encouragement meant a lot to him. Years later, she asked Hughes for a selection of his poems suitable for children. The Dream Keeper was published with an introduction by the librarian.

No matter how unhappy Langston’s home life was, he still shined at school. He continued to stand out in track and many organizations. He was chosen as the yearbook editor and even acted in some high school plays at the encouragement of Sartor. Many students liked the handsome, athletic, friendly young man. Not surprisingly, Langston was elected class poet. He was writing more and more and had a notebook full of poems, including “When Sue Wears Red” about a girl he met at a dance. This was the first time he had written a poem about a girl in whom he was interested. The poem celebrated African American beauty and would later be published in The Crisis. It began:

*When Susanna Jones wears red
Her face is like an ancient cameo
Turned brown by the ages.*

Langston graduated from high school with honors in June. He wanted to go to college but didn’t have the money. His mother continued to insist that he didn’t need to go to college. She wanted him to help pay the bills with a job. Her lack of support must have been painful. Years later, he wrote a heart-wrenching one-act play called *Soul Gone Home*. In the play, the mother berates her son for not helping her by getting a job.

When James Hughes wrote his son about coming to Mexico to discuss his future, Langston was interested. The memory of the previous disastrous summer was still strong, but Hughes hinted that he might send Langston to college. Since Langston wanted to go to college more than anything else, he left for Mexico to see what his father was willing to do for his future.
In 1949 a heart condition caused Houston to be hospitalized. On April 22, 1950, acute coronary thrombosis—a relapse from his earlier heart attack—ended Houston's life. Among his survivors were his wife, Henrietta Williams Houston; their son, Charles Jr.; his father, William LeFevre; and his aunt, Celestine Houston. For Houston's funeral, Howard University's Banksville Chapel was filled to capacity. U.S. Supreme Court Justices came to pay their last respects to the man, whose Justice William O. Douglas in later correspondence to J. Clay Smith called "one of the top ten advocates to appear before the Supreme Court," interment in Lincoln Memorial Cemetery in St. Louis, Maryland, immediately followed funeral services on April 26, 1950.

Houston's high competence and success as an educator, constitutional lawyer, legal strategist, and advisor had an immediate impact on interpretation of the law and opportunities for African Americans as well as far-reaching consequences for the ongoing struggle for freedom of African Americans.

In June 1950, Charles Jr. accepted for his father the NAACP's Spingarn Medal. The Board of Trustees of Howard University voted to name their law school after Houston, and in 1981 Thurgood Marshall participated in a ceremony for the unveiling of a bust in Houston's honor. Numerous African American law students and lawyers organizations now bear his name, as do several public schools.—GENNA RAE McNEIL.

LANGSTON HUGHES 1902–1967
Writer, editor, lecturer

Langston Hughes achieved fame and endurance as a poet during the burgeoning of the arts known as the Harlem Renaissance, but people who label him a "Harlem Renaissance poet" have restricted his fame in one genre and one decade. For better, if one must label, is to note that Langston Hughes followed Paul Lawrence Dunbar as one of the few African American writers of the period who became successful in their art. Thus, his credential illuminates a popular and critically acclaimed life-long career in writing in every genre. While our legacy includes many notable authors, only a few can claim to have sustained themselves throughout their mature years by earnings from their writings.

Born James Langston Hughes on February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri, a mining town, the young Langston lived among well-educated African Americans. His parents, Carrie Mercer Langston and James Nathaniel Hughes, separated just before Langston could know and enjoy his father, but his extended family provided him with shelter and clothing plus education, heritage, and culture. James Hughes, certified as a teacher and eligible for a civil service position in the post office, was unhappily underemployed as a stenographer with a mining company in Joplin. He became frustrated with racial barriers in the United States and moved to Mexico. Carrie Hughes, who enjoyed literature and theater, then moved her baby and herself into the home of her mother, Mary Sampson Patterson Craver Langston, who had been born free in North Carolina and had been educated at Oberlin College in Ohio. From her side of the family came distinguished forebears whom Hughes proudly acknowledged in his first autobiography, The Big Sea. Mary Patterson's first husband, Sheridan Leary, had died in John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry. Her second husband, Charles Langston, was a great abolitionist, and his brother, John Mercer Langston, earned three degrees from Oberlin College, passed the Ohio bar, and represented a Virginia district in the United States Congress. Hughes had been a second child, but his sibling died in infancy.

Early years The search for employment led his mother and stepfather, Homer Clark, to move several times. Hughes lived sometimes with his grandmother, and sometimes with other surrogate parents, moving often. One of his essays claims that he has slept in "Ten Thousand Beds." Growing up in the Midwest (Lawrence, Kansas, Topeka, Kansas, Lincoln, Illinois, Cleveland, Ohio), young Hughes learned the blues and spirituality. He would subsequently weave these musical elements into his own poetry and fiction.

In high school in Cleveland, Ohio, Hughes was designated "class poet," and there he published his first short stories. He adopted as friends an assortment of ethnic classmates, yet he also suffered racial insults at the hands of other whites. He learned firsthand to distinguish "decent" from "reactionary" white folks, distinctions he would retain in Not Without Laughter and in his "Here to Yonder" columns in the Chicago Defender. Like many other writers, Hughes endured periods of loneliness and isolation. Seeking some consolation and continuity in the midst of the myriad relocations of his youth, he grew to love books. Thus, he cared about writing books and sought to replicate the powerful impact other writers from many cultures had made upon him.

In his writing, Hughes accomplished an important feat. While others wallowed in self-revelation as a balm for their loneliness, Hughes often transformed his own agonies into the settings enduring by the collective race and sometimes all of humankind. After graduating from Central High School in Cleveland in 1920, he moved to Mexico City to live with his father for one year. His mother fumed about his departure, and his father offered him little warmth. Yet, with his unique gift for writing, Hughes transformed his own agony about sparring parents into the noted poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," published by Crisis in 1921.

Although Langston Hughes attempted to fulfill his ambitious father's goal for him, he discovered that the pre-engineering track at Columbia University was not his calling. While in New York, however, he savored the excitement of Harlem at the height of the Renaissance. Some of the fascination and appreciation lingers in his poetry, including "The Weary Blues." Breaking abruptly from his insulated father, Hughes withdrew from Columbia University in 1922 and a year later began his independent travels of the world, travels that gave him a
securing a book contract with Alfred A. Knopf. Hughes also enjoyed his “discovery” by Vachel Lindsay as the “busboy poet.”

First books are published  Hughes’s first volume of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, appeared in 1926. In that year, during the period of “The New Negro,” Hughes returned to college. This time, as an older student and an acclaimed poet at the nation’s first African American college, Lincoln University, in Pennsylvania, Hughes succeeded. Spending any available weekend soaking up theater and music in nearby New York City, Hughes satisfied academic requirements during the week. His outspoken criticisms addressed the contradiction between the alleged leadership being developed and Lincoln’s refusal at that time to hire its own graduates as professors.

A second volume of poetry, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, followed in 1927. The Harlem Renaissance was in full bloom, and Hughes became one of the celebrated young talents who flourished during this era. Some controversy attended his celebrity, however. Not all blacks relished his use of dialect, his interpretation of blues and jazz, or his vivid and sensitive portrayals of workers. Hughes repeatedly denied that he was vulnerable to harsh criticism, and he proved his durability in his early years by withstanding the harsh comments about the second volume, including his designation not as poet laureate but as the “poet low-rate” of Harlem.

As Hughes completed his degree at Lincoln University in 1929, he also completed his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, published in 1930. Still receiving financial assistance from Charles Mason, the patron he shared with Zora Neale Hurston and Alain Locke, among others, Hughes had also accepted her advice regarding the contents and tone of the novel. He expressed disappointment with the completed novel, but the text remains in print, retaining uplifting representations of the diverse populations within the black community.

In 1930, however, Hughes separated from the control and the financial support of Mason. His integrity meant more to him than any luxuries her wealth could provide for him, thus, as with the break from his father, Hughes abandoned financial security in search of his own goals. When Mason disapproved of him, Hurston and Locke, who remained loyal to her, dropped from Hughes’s list of associates.

Upon the advice of Mary McLeod Bethune and sponsored by an award from the Rosenwald Foundation, Hughes began to tour the South with his poetry. Accepting humble venues as well as notable ones, he traveled throughout the South. Highly regarded as a reader, handsome and warm as a person, Hughes gained many readers and many admirers during his tours. He also visited the Scottsboro Boys in Alabama, who were accused of sexually attacking a white woman. Hughes created poetic and dramatic responses to the men’s plight and the mixed reactions of the American public in *Scottsboro Limited* (1932).

In 1932, Hughes traveled with a group of African Americans to Russia to assist with a film project that never bore fruit. When the project dissolved, most of the participants returned to the United States, but Hughes set off to explore the Soviet Union. In his own observations of the Soviet Union, Hughes saw many reasons to appreciate communism. Thus, while many other American writers were attracted to socialist perspectives during the depression years, Hughes expressed admiration not for the detached ideals but for the practice he had observed. He wrote numerous poems to capture those travels, and later, in both his *Chicago Defender* column and in his second autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*.
Langston Hughes

(1956), he recorded impressions of his travels. After his journey to the Soviet Union, Hughes completed work on his first volume of short stories, *The Way of White Folks* (1954). Some of those stories he had begun writing during his travels in the Soviet Union. In 1956, he received a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship and worked with the Karamu House in Cleveland, Ohio, on several plays. His interest in theater continued in New York, where he founded the Harlem Suitcase Theater in 1938. A 1941 Rosenwald Fund fellowship further supported his play writing. However, he also moved into another genre. His interesting family heritage, his remarkable travels, and his participation in African American culture led to his first autobiographical volume, *The Big Sea* (1940).

The mighty pen in World War II

When the United States plunged into World War II, Hughes escaped military service, but he put his pen to work on behalf of political involvement and nationalism. Writing jingles to encourage the purchase of war bonds, and writing weekly columns in *The Chicago Defender*, Hughes encouraged readers to support the Allies. His appeals remained consistent with the “Double-V” campaign upheld by the black press: victory at home and victory abroad. Hughes encouraged black Americans to support the United States in its goals abroad, but he encouraged the government to provide for its own citizens at home. His same freedoms being advocated abroad. A fictional voice emerged from these columns, that of Jesse B. Simple, better known as “Simple.” While the character initially appeared as a Harlem everyman who needed encouragement to support the racially segregated U.S. armed forces, Simple evolved into a popular and enduring fictional character. The first volume of stories to develop from Simple’s appearances in *The Chicago Defender* was published by Simon and Schuster in 1950, *Simple Speaks His Mind*.

Hughes retained his interest in theater, working with Kurt Weill and Elmer Rice to develop a musical adaptation of Rice’s play *Street Scene*. The musical opened on Broadway in 1947, where it enjoyed a long run. The story was financially beneficial to Hughes. With the proceeds from that effort, Hughes purchased the home at 22 East 127th Street in Harlem. His “aunt” Roy Harper and “uncle” Emerson Harper moved there, too. The home has been designated a historical landmark.

Another significant theatrical collaboration involved William Grant Still, the first black composer in the United States to have a symphony performed by a major symphony orchestra, the first to have an opera produced by a major company in America, and the first to conduct a major symphony orchestra in the Deep South. Hughes and Still collaborated on *Troubled Island*, on the life of Jean Jacques Dessalines of Haiti, which Hughes had transformed from a play to a libretto. Hughes was in Spain reporting on the Spanish Civil War for the *Baltimore Afro-American* when Still was adapting his libretto for an opera. Yet the project finally reached completion, with valuable assistance from Verne Arvey, Still’s wife. The opera finally opened in New York in 1949.

During the 1940s, his poetry volumes also continued to appear: *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942), *Fields of Wonder* (1947), and *One-Way Ticket* (1948). He also engaged in various translation projects, including both French and Spanish original texts. Hughes’s successes as a writer were acknowledged through the awarding of one thousand dollars from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1945. With his friend Arna Bontemps, he edited *The Poetry of the Negro* (1949).

The 1950s brought the Cold War and the horrors of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s subcommittee on subversive activities. With his published record of socialist sentiments and his public associations with known Communists, Hughes had undergone several years of attacks and boycotts. Thus, in 1953 he was subpoenaed to testify about his interests in communism, holding fast to his own dream of sustaining his career as a writer, Hughes salvaged his image as a loyal American citizen. Although he had bravely challenged authority figures earlier in life, in this situation he acted to protect his chosen profession. He retained speaking engagements and his works continued to sell, but he lost the respect of some political activists. Communists bitterly resented the way he abandoned his independence members of the party, including W.E.B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson, whom Hughes had lauded in earlier decades. Hughes chose self-preservation and sustained his career as a writer.

A flourishing literary career

To sustain his career as a writer, Hughes often accepted multiple book contracts simultaneously, thereby imposing upon himself an arduous schedule of production. His writing was work, not mere pleasure, whim, or hobby. Correspondence housed in the Beinecke collection at Yale University (New Haven, Connecticut), in the Special Collections of Fisk University (Nashville, Tennessee), in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (New York City), and in the Charles W. Eliot edition of *Arna Bontemps—Langston Hughes Letters*, 1525–1967 (1980) reveal Hughes’s frantic pace of writing, editing, revising, and publishing from the 1950s to the end of his life. He began to sell juvenile histories, including *Famous American Negroes* and *The First Book of Rhythm and *Famous Negro Music Makers* in 1955. He collaborated with photographer Roy DeCarava on *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* in 1956. In the same year he wrote *Tambourines to Glory, The First Book of the West Indies*, and his second autobiography, *I Wonder As I Wander*.


The last ten years of his life were marked by a astonishing proliferation of books: juvenile histories, poetry volumes, anthologies, an adult history of the NAACP *Fight for Freedom* (1962), and anthologies Hughes edited. Some of his efforts in drama were collected by Webster Smalley in *Five Plays by Langston Hughes* (1966). Hughes was induced into the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1961, the year he published his innovative book of poems to be read with jazz accompaniment, *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*. During the 1950s he also recorded an album of his own reading *some of his earlier verse, accompanied by jazz great Charles Mingus*.

Strangely, despite a lifelong celebrated writing career, Hughes was still viewed with unfamiliar eyes as he shifted his weekly newspaper column from the *Chicago Defender* to the *New York Post*. The 1960s are noted for their radical politics, while Hughes had never shunned aggressive politics, he was mistaken for a timid accommodationist. Readers letters reveal ignorance about his consistently positive appreciation of black people and culture and his consistently fair treatment of people of all races and cultures. Resilient even to the end of his life, Hughes whitewashed accusations that he foolishly joked about racial
turnmoil. He endured the hostile criticism, but in 1965 he ended his twenty-two-year tenure as a newspaper columnist.

His death on May 22, 1967, came quickly and without fanfare, as he was registered in the New York Polyclinic Hospital as James Hughes (this is given first and last names). Memorial services followed many of his own wishes, including the playing of Duke Ellington's "Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me."

**Volumes after his death** The works of Langston Hughes have continued to flourish, even after his death. He had prepared *The Panther and the Lash* (1957), a collection of poems, but it was not published until after his death. Collaborations such as *Black Magic* (with Milton Melzer, 1967) and a revision of the 1949 anthology, *The Poetry of the Negro 1746–1970* (edited by Hughes and Anna Bontemps, 1970) were published, acknowledging his contributions and lamenting his death. Subsequent years have brought numerous collections of verse and essays.

Critical assessments of Langston Hughes have included scores of articles in scholarly journals and presentations at conferences, many of which have been collected into volumes of essays. Also, several book-length studies of Hughes's literary works have been added to the core of information.


Hughes never married and never had children. Yet, through his writing and through his generosity as a "dean" of literature, he nurtured scores of writers and left behind an enduring legacy of literature. Over twenty years after his death, on the eighty-ninth anniversary of Hughes's birth in 1994, with great celebration by noted writers such as Maya Angelou and Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), his cremated remains were interred beneath the commemoratively designed "I've Known Rivers" tile floor in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. Visitors to this noted research center may see this floor, pay respects to his remains, and remember the man for whom the Langston Hughes Auditorium is named—

**DONNA AKIBA SULLIVAN HAFER**

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**ZORA NEALE HURSTON**

1891–1960

Folklorist, writer

The list of words accurately describing the thirty-year career of Zora Neale Hurston includes anthropologist, dramatist, essayist, folklorist, novelist, short story writer, and autobiographer. She is noted as the first black American to collect and publish African American and African Caribbean folklore. Her study of black folklore throughout the African diaspora shaped her entire career as an essayist and creative writer; she wrote numerous articles on various aspects of black culture—in dialect, religious rituals, and folk tales—and three of her four published novels deal with the common black folk of her native southern Florida.

Hurston was born January 7, 1891, in Notasulga, Alabama, to Reverend John Hurston and Lucy Ann (Pota) Hurston. When Hurston was very young, the family moved to Eatonville, Florida, the first incorporated black town in the United States. In her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston credits the adult "lying sessions" (daily exchanges of folk tales) on Joe Clark's store porch in Eatonville for giving her important insights into the nature of human behavior. While many of the adults who engaged in telling tales, singing songs, and "lying" were unemployed at various times during Hurston's childhood, when Hurston described these sessions in her writings, she studiously avoided protesting economic discrimination against blacks in America. She chose to demonstrate the creativity and vibrance of black life in America rather than depicting the surface poverty and one-dimensional acts of social protest. The poet and critic Arna Bontemps, one of Hurston's contemporaries during the Harlem Renaissance, stated in his review of her autobiography that Hurston "died very simply with the more serious aspects of Negro life in America—she ignores them."

One of Hurston's earliest published essays, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," states in no uncertain terms her refusal to spend her life lamenting the social plight of the black American:

I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the heiter-scherziger skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

We can attribute this defiant confidence in her capabilities and in America's positive responses to her talents to her early life in Eatonville and her mother's encouragement to "jump at the sun" even if she could not land there. Furthermore, her statement reflects her unwavering belief in the fundamental equality between the races: there were good and bad, strong and weak individuals among both races, and no one group was perfect.

In 1925, after studying for a time at Howard University, Hurston migrated to New York City and immediately became involved with the Harlem Renaissance. The black literary and cultural movement of the 1920s. During that time Harlem was the mecca for creative blacks from all over the United States and the Caribbean. Writers such as Claude McKay arrived from Jamaica, Eric Walrod from Barbados, Wallace Thurman from Salt Lake City, Jean Toomer, and Sterling Brown from Washington, D.C., Rudolph Fish from Rhode Island, and Langston...
friends from their cell and lynched them. Another noose was prepared for Cameron. But his life was miraculously spared. Cameron swears he heard a woman's voice asking that the noose be removed from his neck, but he learned later it was a voice only he heard. Never before has there been such a gripping account from someone so close to the hot breath of vigilantes, but Cameron recalls the incident without melodrama.

Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.'s enemies were far more subtle and sophisticated than the rabid throng who threatened Cameron's life. To fight them, Powell took his protest to the streets of Harlem, rousing his army of demonstrators with the slogan, "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work." Many scholars contend these tactics were pivotal in the rise of the civil rights movement a score of years later. It is certainly true that the success of these boycotts was instrumental in Powell's political ascendance. Suave and debonair, Powell beguiled political activists with the same charisma that brought worshipers to Abyssinian Baptist Church. He moved almost effortlessly from the pulpit to New York City's council, becoming the body's first black member. Three years later he was in Washington, D.C., as a congressman representing Harlem, a position he held for eleven successive terms. As chairman of the House Committee on Education and Labor, he was extremely effective and introduced a number of progressive legislative bills in Congress.

**NEW YORK, 1926**

It was a period when local and visiting royalty were not at all uncommon in Harlem. And when the parties of A'Lelia Walker, the Negro heiress, were filled with guests whose names would turn any Nordic social climber green with envy. It was a period when Harold Jackman, a handsome young Harlem school teacher of modest means, calmly announced one day that he was sailing for the Riviera for a fortnight, to attend Princess Murat's yacht's party. It was a period when Charleston preachers opened up shouting churches as sideshows for white tourists. It was a period when at least one charming colored chorus girl, amber enough to pass for a Latin American, was living in a pent house, with all her bills paid by a gentleman whose name was banker's magic on Wall Street. It was a period when every season there was at least one hit play on Broadway acted by a Negro cast. And when books by Negro authors were being published with much greater frequency and much more publicity than ever before or since in history. It was a period when white writers wrote about Negroes more successfully (commercially speaking) than Negroes did about themselves. It was the period (God help us!) when Ethel Barrymore appeared in blackface in *Scarlet Sister Mary*. It was the period when the Negro was in vogue.

I was there. I had a swell time while it lasted. But I thought it wouldn't last long. (I remember the vogue for things Russian, the season the Chauve-Souris first came to town.) For how could a large and enthusiastic number of people be crazy about Negroes forever? But some Harlemites thought the millennium had come. They thought the race problem had at last been solved through Art plus Gladys Bentley. They were sure the New Negro would lead a new life
from then on in green pastures of tolerance created by Countee Cullen, Ethel Waters, Claude McKay, Duke Ellington, Bojangles, and Alain Locke.

I don’t know what made any Negroes think that—except that they were mostly intellectuals doing the thinking. The ordinary Negroes hadn’t heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn’t raised their wages any. As for all those white folks in the speakeasies and night clubs of Harlem—well, maybe a colored man could find some place to have a drink that the tourists hadn’t yet discovered.

HARLEM LITERATI

The summer of 1926, I lived in a rooming house on 137th Street, where Wallace Thurman and Harcourt Tynes also lived. Thurman was then managing editor of the Messenger, a Negro magazine that had a curious career. It began by being very radical, racial, and socialistic, just after the war. I believe it received a grant from the Garland Fund in its early days. Then it later became a kind of Negro society magazine and a plugger for Negro business, with photographs of prominent colored ladies and their nice homes in it. A. Phillip Randolph, now President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Chandler Owen, and George S. Schuyler were connected with it. Schuyler’s editorials, à la Mencken, were the most interesting things in the magazine, verbal brickbats that said sometimes one thing, sometimes another, but always vigorously. I asked Thurman what kind of magazine the Messenger was, and he said it reflected the policy of whoever paid off best at the time.

Anyway, the Messenger bought my first short stories. They paid me ten dollars a story. Wallace Thurman wrote me that they were very bad stories, but better than any others they could find, so he published them.

Thurman had recently come from California to New York. He was a strangely brilliant black boy, who had read everything, and whose critical mind could find something wrong with everything he read. I have no critical mind, so I usually either like a book or don’t. But I am not capable of liking a book and then finding a million things wrong with it, too—as Thurman was capable of doing.

During the summer of 1926, Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, John P. Davis, Bruce Nugent, Gwendolyn Bennett, and I decided to publish “a Negro quarterly of the arts” to be called Fire—the idea being that it would burn up a lot of the old, dead conventional Negro-white ideas of the past, épater le bourgeois into a realization of the existence of the younger Negro writers and artists, and provide us with an outlet for publication not available in the limited pages of the small Negro magazines then existing, the Crisis, Opportunity, and the Messenger—the first two being house organs of inter-racial organizations, and the latter being God knows what.

Sweating summer evenings we met to plan Fire. Each of the seven of us agreed to give fifty dollars to finance the first issue. Thurman was to edit it, John P. Davis to handle the business end, and Bruce Nugent to take charge of distribution. The rest of us were to serve as an editorial board to collect material, contribute our own work, and act in any useful way that we could. For artists and writers, we got along fine and there were no quarrels. But October came before we were ready to go to press. I had to return to Lincoln, John Davis to Law School at Harvard, Zora Hurston to her studies at Barnard, from whence she went about Harlem with an anthropologist’s ruler, measuring heads for Franz Boas.

Only three of the seven had contributed their fifty dollars, but the others faithfully promised to send theirs out of tuition checks, wages, or begging. Thurman went on with the work of preparing the magazine. He got a printer. He planned the layout. It had to be on good paper, he said, worthy of the drawings of Aaron Douglas. It had to have beautiful type, worthy of the first Negro art quarterly. It had to be what seven young Negroes dreamed our magazine would be—so in the end it cost almost a thousand dollars, and nobody could pay the bills.

I don’t know how Thurman persuaded the printer to let us have all the copies to distribute, but he did. I think Alain Locke, among others, signed notes guaranteeing payments. But since Thurman was the only one of the seven of us with a regular job, for the next three or four years his checks were constantly being attached and his income seized to pay for Fire. And whenever I sold a poem, mine went there, too—to Fire.

None of the older Negro intellectuals would have anything to do with Fire. Dr. Du Bois in the Crisis roasted it. The Negro press called it all sorts of bad names, largely because of a green and purple story by Bruce Nugent, in the Oscar Wilde tradition, which we had included. Rea Graves, the critic for the Baltimore Afro-American, began his review by saying: "I have just tossed the first issue of Fire into the fire." Commenting upon various of our contributors, he said: "Aaron Douglas who, in spite of himself and the meaningless grotesqueness of his creations, has gained a reputation as an artist, is permitted to spoil three perfectly good pages and a cover with his pen and ink hudge pudge. Countee Cullen has written a beautiful poem in his From a Dark Tower, but tries his best to obscure the thought in superfluous sentences. Langston Hughes displays his usual ability to say nothing in many words."

So Fire had plenty of cold water thrown on it by the colored critics. The white critics (except for an excellent editorial in the Bookman for November, 1926) scarcely noticed it at all. We had no way of getting it distributed to bookstands or news stands. Bruce Nugent took it around New York on foot
and some of the Greenwich Village bookshops put it on display, and sold it for us. But then Bruce, who had no job, would collect the money and, on account of salary, eat it up before he got back to Harlem.

Finally, irony of ironies, several hundred copies of *Fire* were stored in the basement of an apartment where an actual fire occurred and the bulk of the whole issue was burned up. Even after that Thurman had to go on paying the printer.

Now *Fire* is a collector's item, and very difficult to get, being mostly ashes. That taught me a lesson about little magazines. But since white folks had them, we Negroes thought we could have one, too. But we didn't have the money.

Wallace Thurman laughed a long bitter laugh. He was a strange kind of fellow, who liked to drink gin, but didn't like to drink gin; who liked being a Negro, but felt it a great handicap; who adored bohemia, and thought it wrong to be a bohemian. He liked to waste a lot of time, but he always felt guilty wasting time. He loathed crowds, yet he hated to be alone. He almost always felt bad, yet he didn't write poetry.

Once I told him if I could feel as bad as he did all the time, I would surely produce wonderful books. But he said you had to know how to write, as well as how to feel bad. I said I didn't have to know how to feel bad, because, every so often, the blues just naturally overtook me, like a blind beggar with an old guitar:

*You don't know.*
*You don't know my mind—*  
*When you see me laughin',*  
*I'm laughin' to keep from cryin'.*

About the future of Negro literature Thurman was very pessimistic. He thought the Negro vogue had made us all too conscious of ourselves, had flattered and spoiled us, and had provided too many easy opportunities for some of us to drink gin and more gin, on which he thought we would always be drunk. With his bitter sense of humor, he called the Harlem literati, the "niggerati."

Of this "niggerati," Zora Neale Hurston was certainly the most amusing. Only to reach a wider audience, need she ever write books—because she is a perfect book of entertainment in herself. In her youth she was always getting scholarships and things from wealthy white people, some of whom simply paid her just to sit around and represent the Negro race for them, so she did it in such a racy fashion. She was full of side-splitting anecdotes, humorous tales, and tragically comic stories, remembered out of her life in the South as a daughter of a travelling minister of God. She could make you laugh one minute and cry the next. To many of her white friends, no doubt, she was a perfect "darkie," in the nice meaning they give the term—that is a naive, childlike, sweet, humorous, and highly colored Negro.

But Miss Hurston was clever, too—a student who didn't let college give her a broad a and who had great scorn for all pretensions, academic or otherwise. That is why she was such a fine folklore collector, able to go among the people and never act as if she had been to school at all. Almost nobody else could stop the average Harlemite on Lenox Avenue and measure his head with a strange-looking, anthropological device and not get bawled out for the attempt, except Zora, who used to stop anyone whose head looked interesting, and measure it.

When Miss Hurston graduated from Barnard she took an apartment in West 66th Street near the park, in that row of Negro houses there. She moved in with no furniture at all and no money, but in a few days friends had given her everything, from decorative silver birds, perched atop the linen cabinet, down to a footstool. And on Saturday night, to christen the place, she had a *hand*-chicken dinner, since she had forgotten to say she needed forks.

She seemed to know almost everybody in New York. She had been a secretary to Fannie Hurst, and had met dozens of celebrities whose friendship she retained. Yet she was always having terrific ups-and-downs about money. She tells this story about herself, about needing a nickel to go downtown one day and wondering where on earth she would get it. As she approached the subway, she was stopped by a blind beggar holding out his cup.

"Please help the blind! Help the blind! A nickel for the blind!"

"I need money worse than you today," said Miss Hurston, taking five cents out of his cup. "Lend me this! Next time, I'll give it back." And she went on downtown.

Harlem was like a great magnet for the Negro intellectual, pulling him from everywhere. Or perhaps the magnet was New York—but once in New York, he had to live in Harlem, for rooms were hardly to be found anywhere unless one could pass for white or Mexican or Eurasian and perhaps live in the Village—which always seemed to me a very arty locale, in spite of the many real artists and writers who lived there. Only a few of the New Negroes lived in the Village, Harlem being their real stamping ground.

The wittiest of these New Negroes of Harlem, whose tongue was flavored with the sharpest and saltiest humor, was Rudolph Fisher, whose stories appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*. His novel, *Walls of Jericho*, captures but slightly the raciness of his own conversation. He was a young medical doctor and X-ray specialist, who always frightened me a little, because he could think of the most incisively clever things to say—and I could never think of anything to answer. He and Alain Locke together were great for intellectual wise-cracking. The two would fling big and witty words about with such swift and punning inmuendo.
that an ordinary mortal just sat and looked wary for fear of being caught in a
net of witticisms beyond his cultural ken. I used to wish I could talk like
Rudolph Fisher. Besides being a good writer, he was an excellent singer, and
had sung with Paul Robeson during their college days. But I guess Fisher was
too brilliant and too talented to stay long on this earth. During the same week,
in December, 1934, he and Wallace Thurman both died.

Thurman died of tuberculosis in the charity ward at Bellevue Hospital,
having just flown back to New York from Hollywood.

HOWARD "STRETCH" JOHNSON

From His Unpublished Memoirs

NEW YORK CITY, 1928

The first time I heard of the Cotton Club was in 1928 when
the Duke Ellington Orchestra broadcast on a nationwide evening hook-up
on WABC, the CBS affiliate. We couldn't wait to hear the strains of East St.
Louis Toodle-00, the Ellington theme song of that time, gradually swelling as the
voice-over of Ted Husing, in an impeccable accent and mellifluous baritone
announced, "... and now from the Cotton Club... the aristocrat of
Harlem, where Park Avenue, Broadway, and Hollywood rub elbows... the
Jungle Band of Duke Ellington!"

We didn't know at the time that the splendid sound of the Ellington
organization was not jungle music. At the age of 13, I didn't know jungle music
from juke box or jazz! In fact, the only live music I had experienced was the
concert band that used to play at Orange Park on Sunday afternoons, the
exciting Jenkins Orphanage Band from Charleston, South Carolina, and a tacky
pickup band that played at Kinney's Hall on Broome Street in Newark when
my father took me on one of his mysterious expeditions to that area in what I
guess was a kind of male bonding. I later felt Ellington's sound was a creative
form of irony which masked the commercial pandering to an upper-class white
audience thrilled at the opportunity to witness and hear what it thought was
genuine black exotica. So, in our innocence, Irving Overby, Robby Benjamin,
and I with four hastily-recruited sidemen, formed our version of the Ellington
Orchestra, playing kazooos for brass, tissue paper folded over combs for reeds,
and washboards and pots and pans with thimbles for rhythm and percussion.
Inspired by Ellington, we played in the Overby's cellar where our "jungle"
music would not bring the neighborhood down on us. When we thought we
My World Will Not End

Poets who write mostly about love, roses, and moonlight... must lead a very quiet life," Hughes once said. "Seldom, I imagine, does their poetry get them into difficulties."

Langston Hughes always wanted his writing to reflect the real lives of real people, their sorrows and joys, and especially their laughter. He observed the way laughter helped people, especially African-American people, deal with the problems they faced in American society. One of Hughes's best tools in the fight against racial prejudice was his sense of humor.

Like many writers who confronted real social problems, Hughes used satire. By making fun of social injustice and hypocrisy, he could make them seem ridiculous and far less powerful and frightening. When Hughes wrote his poem "Good Morning, Revolution," for example, he used a playful tone and spoke to "Revolution" as a friend who would help with the difficulties of being black in a prejudiced white world. In the 1950s, however, Hughes found himself increasingly in trouble with powerful people in the U.S. government who did not share his sense of humor.

After World War II, tension between the United States and the Communist rulers of the Soviet Union grew into a rivalry known as the Cold War. Fear of Communist influences and worry over the threat of actual war with the
Soviet Union caused the American government to begin searching the country for anyone who might be sympathetic to Communist thought. Langston Hughes had not only visited the Soviet Union, he had also written about the shortcomings of American society in fulfilling the promise of freedom and equality for all.

Hughes was one of thousands of American men and women who came under attack in the 1950s for criticizing the United States government. In March 1953, Hughes was summoned to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee, chaired by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Although he could have invoked the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and refused to answer questions that might tend to incriminate him, Hughes did not. He patiently answered all questions from the committee, saying that he had never been a member of the Communist Party. Despite harsh, insistent questioning, Hughes refused to name anyone he might know to be a Communist.

Although Senator McCarthy and his committee were later discredited for their activities, their accusations affected the lives of thousands of citizens. Langston Hughes lost work as a lecturer and faced protestors at his public appearances from that time on. Reporting what he saw and thought in a truthful way had hurt his income, but he was not about to compromise his efforts to improve American society. Hughes had many voices and many creative ways to reach the eyes and ears of America.

"Humor is a weapon, too," Hughes wrote. "If Negroes took all the white world's boorishness to heart and wept..."
One of Hughes's best tools was his sense of humor.

over it as profoundly as our serious writers do, we would have been dead long ago." He published the second volume of his autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*. In it, he described his travel adventures during the 1930s and ended his story with the world poised on the brink of a global war. "Would civilization be destroyed? Would the world really end?" He wondered for a moment but concluded with hope, "Not my world. . . . My world will not end." In 1959, the best of his forty-eight years of poetry was published in *Selected Poems*.

In 1960, Hughes was awarded the Spingarn Medal, the annual NAACP prize given to an African American for high achievement. In his speech at the NAACP convention that year, he accepted the award "in the name of Negro people. . . . Without them . . . there would have been no poems; without their hopes and fears and dreams, no stories; without their struggles, no dramas; without their music, no songs." During the 1960s, Hughes made several international trips, including a return to Africa for the first time in forty years. At the end of 1960, he was invited to Nigeria to see Nnamdi Azikiwe, one of his classmates from Lincoln University, inaugurated as leader of the newly-independent country. He returned to Nigeria the following year as a delegate to a festival organized by the American Society of African Cultures. In 1962, he attended a writers' conference in Uganda and visited Egypt and Italy before returning home. In April 1966, Hughes traveled to Dakar, Senegal, as a U.S. representative to the First World Festival of
“Humor is a weapon, too,” said Hughes, though this 1965 Christmas card just looks like fun.

Negro Arts. He made four visits to Paris during the 1960s, calling it a city like no other.

Awards and honors for Hughes continued in the 1960s when he received an honorary doctorate from Howard University in Washington, D.C., and was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He made two visits to the White House, once at the invitation of the visiting president of Senegal, Leopold Sedar Senghor, and again to participate in the first national poetry festival in 1962. The humorous irony of these visits to Washington less than a decade after his summons by the McCarthy committee must have added to Hughes's enjoyment of these occasions.

Hughes continued to write about Simple until 1965. When he decided to retire Simple, he told critics, “The racial climate has gotten so complicated and bitter that cheerful and ironic humor is less and less understandable to so many people.”

Although Hughes had always been a poet of racial awareness, the 1960s brought a new era of radical social action in the pursuit of equality and freedom for African-Americans. Hughes never participated in the protests and freedom marches of the civil rights movement during the 1960s. Although he was criticized for “standing on the sidelines,” he supported the movement with his writing and speaking. His words were his weapons, and he continued to use them for the cause.

During the last years of his life, Hughes was showered with invitations to special programs in his honor. From the Library of Congress to the University of Nigeria, requests for his presence poured in. As always, he struggled to balance his time, energy, and the ever-present need to
pay his bills with all the projects he hoped to complete. Writing colleague Milton Meltzer visited Hughes at his Harlem townhouse in the spring of 1967 and found him facing a tremendous pile of work. Meltzer asked the sixty-five-year-old Hughes if he ever intended to take it easy. "Not hardly," [Hughes] said. He hoped to be writing for a long time. . . . Living this way it was impossible to be bored or tired."9

As relaxed as he seemed, a stressful life and little attention to his health had taken its toll on Hughes. On May 6, 1967, he checked himself into a hospital in Harlem, suffering from severe stomach pain. After an unsuccessful prostate operation, he died on May 22, 1967, at age sixty-five. Friends around the world were shocked at the news of Langston Hughes's death. One friend wrote what many must have felt: "The truth is that I could expect anything from Langston except the fact that he might die."10

Hughes had left instructions in his papers about his funeral service. He wanted a service in a Harlem funeral home with jazz music. Three days after his death, his wishes were carried out. A piano, bass, and drums combo played jazz for the mourners, and Arna Bontemps spoke about his friend. The memorial program carried words from "I Dream a World," Hughes's libretto for the opera Troubled Island: "I dream a world where all / Will know sweet freedom's way."11 With characteristic humor, Hughes had requested a final musical number for his service: "Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me."
Birthday Party for Langston

Langston Hughes loved and respected the people of Harlem. They felt the same way about him. In 1989, a party was held in his honor at the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. On what would have been his eighty-seventh birthday, Hughes's ashes were buried under the floor of the Langston Hughes Auditorium. A tile design called "Rivers" marks the place. Friends wore red, as Hughes had requested in one of his poems, and danced on the tile floor in a joyous celebration of his life.

The end of his life in 1967 was really only the beginning of the story of Langston Hughes. In the years since his death, scholars and critics have studied and praised him, teachers have introduced him to new generations of Americans, and publishers who once rejected him are creating new editions of his work. Hughes would probably have laughed at the irony of these events. "Words put together beautifully, with rhythm and meaning...such words can be of more value to humanity than food to the hungry or garments to the cold," he once wrote. Langston Hughes's lifelong struggle to bring forth those words has made him the best-known, and perhaps best-loved, African-American poet of the twentieth century.

Chronology

1902—James Langston Hughes is born in Joplin, Missouri, on February 1. Later that year, his father leaves the family and moves to Mexico.

1908—Langston begins school in Topeka, Kansas, where he is living with his mother.

1909—Lives with his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas, until her death.

1913—Moves to Cleveland and enrolls in Central High.

1919—Visits his father in Mexico for the summer.

1920—Graduates from Central High and moves to Mexico to live with his father.


1923—Sails to Africa and Europe as a merchant seaman.

1924—Lives in Paris and works at a jazz club.

1925—Wins Opportunity magazine poetry prize.

1926—Publishes The Weary Blues. Attends Lincoln University.

1927—Publishes Fine Clothes to the Jew.

1929—Graduates from Lincoln University.

1930—Publishes Not Without Laughter.
Chapter 1

A Blues Life

Joplin, Missouri, was a booming town in 1900. The thriving city, situated near the southwestern border of the state, profited hugely from a mining and prospecting industry that found southwest Missouri a veritable treasure trove of natural minerals. By the time Langston Hughes was born in Joplin in 1902, that city had become the lead and zinc capital of the world—a place where a loaf of bread would hardly have cost four cents, a gallon of milk twenty-eight cents, and an automobile, a new luxury item, more than nine hundred dollars. Hughes's father, James Nathaniel Hughes, took a job as a stenographer for the Lincoln Mining Company, earning a modest twenty-five dollars per month, just enough to keep his new wife comfortable in a rented cottage residence at 1602 Missouri Avenue in Joplin.

James Hughes and Carrie Langston married on April 30, 1899, in Guthrie, Oklahoma, a few short miles from the black township that bore Carrie Langston's family name. Like Guthrie, where James and Carrie met, Langston, Oklahoma, attracted African-American settlers, farmers, cowboys, and speculators by the thousands. They were lured by talk of land grabs, new business opportunities, and the prospects of many all-black townships being founded nearby. Not yet admitted into statehood, the Oklahoma territory was an exciting draw for James Hughes, an ambitious African-American schoolteacher, farmer, grocer, and law clerk from Charlestown, Indiana. Despite Oklahoma's appeal for African Americans at the turn of the century and its relative racial freedoms, its
enduring racism did not allow James Hughes to fulfill his most ardent ambition: to practice law in the Oklahoma territory. He would soon leave Oklahoma and settle in Joplin, Missouri.

For all its industrial wealth, however, Joplin, too, would prove to be insufficiently rewarding for a man with big ambitions who detested nothing more sternly than black indigence (so sternly that he took to despising even the black poor themselves). In 1901, after two years of work and marriage in Joplin, James and Carrie set out for Buffalo, New York. Little is known about why they chose to relocate to Buffalo, but it was there, less than six months later, that Carrie discovered she was pregnant. Already, though, James was intent upon moving to Cuba, whatever the sacrifice, for a business venture. By year's end, he had settled alone in Cuba. Either unwilling or physically unable to follow her husband so far from home, Carrie returned to Joplin, where she delivered a son on February 1, 1902, two months after her separation from James. Still, Carrie named her newborn after his distant father. James Langston Hughes was his proper name. Soon enough, however, James was dropped in favor of Langston, a name of mark made prominent by Carrie's uncle John Mercer Langston, an extraordinary lawyer, professor, statesman, abolitionist, and the first African American elected to Congress in Virginia. Against this complicated background of proud ancestry and an absent father, Langston Hughes entered the world at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Childhood
At Hughes's birth, his young mother found herself alone in Joplin with an infant son to care for and unfulfilled dreams of becoming a theater actor and performer. Resentful and wounded, Hughes's mother did not take joyfully to motherhood, it seems, and, although she was present, did not take an active part in his upbringing. Instead, it was Hughes's grandmother, Mary Langston, who took upon herself the primary responsibility of caring for young Hughes while his mother worked and lodged elsewhere, usually out of town. With occasional help from Carrie, and with James Hughes entirely divorced from his son's rearing, Mary Langston, approaching seventy years old when Hughes was born, raised her grandson until her death when he was twelve.

Naturally, her influence upon Hughes was deep. Moving him with her from Joplin back to her home in Lawrence, Kansas, when Hughes was not much more than a toddler, she stirred him with her gift of storytelling. Sitting at the foot of her rocker, Hughes delighted in Mary's stories of slavery and freedom, proud family heritage, and adventure and heroism. In her stories there were lessons of black American pride and valor that Hughes would soon need to comfort and reassure him when the ugly face of racism caused him to doubt his own intelligence and talents. More than once did the “dreamy little boy” (Rampersad, 1.13) have to fight back feelings of racial inferiority caused by the insult of others' racial prejudice.

When Hughes entered the Pinckney School in Lawrence as a second grader, he was assigned to a single segregated classroom along with the school's other black children, first through third graders. Because of Lawrence's segregation laws (dubbed Jim Crow laws all over the country), none of the city's black children were permitted to swim at the local YMCA or register in the Boy Scouts as they might have liked. When the Patee Theater on Massachusetts Street suddenly reversed its policy of admitting “colored” people, posting a new sign prohibiting African Americans from entering, it was a blow to young Hughes's pride. It left him a wounded eight-year-old incapable of making any sense at all of the adult absurdity of racial discrimination or the juvenile name-calling by white kids who belittled him as a “ni—er”
on more than a couple of occasions. What was left for him but to internalize those gloomy feelings of inferiority that race prejudice tends to produce in fragile black children?

To add insult to injury, Hughes's grandmother was not at all well off. Although she kept Hughes's clothes clean and neatly pressed, he was often ashamed of her sacrifice to keep him appearing that way: her own clothes were the worn-down, secondhand giveaways of neighborhood women who respected her matronly resolve to clothe and feed Hughes, but saw how difficult it was for a woman her age, unable to work, to do so. Hughes's peers taunted him cruelly about his grandmother's age and appearance, and he was frequently humiliated by their poverty. Mary Langston—so needy that she soon moved the two of them out of her house at 732 Alabama Street in order to rent it out for income—tried mightily to protect her grandson from all the insults of segregation and poverty. Unfortunately, she could not shield him from all suffering. But what embarrassments she could not protect him from, she made up for by exposing him to a wealth of culture and inspiration for which little money was needed.

With grandmother Mary, Hughes sat amid a great crowd of locals gathered to hear a speech by the best-known African American of his era: the matchless orator, Booker T. Washington. And not many boys his age, black or white, ever got the chance to see and hear former president Theodore Roosevelt up close and personal as Hughes did. Hughes's grandmother was the widow of one of abolitionist John Brown's twenty-one coconspirators. At the dedication of the John Brown Memorial Battlefield in Osawatomie, Kansas, a short sixty miles from Lawrence, she had been a guest of honor. Seated alongside Mary Langston, the impressionable eight-year-old knew only that something was extraordinary and historical about the event and the nobility of the former president's speechmaking just a few feet away from his own seat on the dais. These were monumental moments for the sensitive little boy.

Still, life in Lawrence was extremely lonely for Hughes, despite Mary Langston's heroic efforts to give him a happy childhood. His loneliness would lead him to discover the wonderful world of books, a world his mother had introduced to him years earlier in one of Topeka's quiet vine-covered public libraries.

From the start young Hughes read voraciously. He regularly read black periodicals such as the Chicago Defender newspaper and the Crisis magazine. Classic American novels like Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin and Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn kept him delightfully engrossed in their pages. And Paul Lawrence Dunbar, "the true fireside poet of the black American home" (Rampersad, 1.19) was an early poetry favorite. These works, along with the Bible, were the most important written works in shaping Hughes into the young grammar-school poet he would soon become.

From Lawrence to Lincoln

Although life in Lawrence, Kansas, was lonesome for a boy who was almost thirteen, it was comfortable and secure just the same. The sudden passing of Hughes's seventy-nine-year-old grandmother, however, quickly changed everything. Hughes entered the eighth grade not in Lawrence but in the small hamlet of Lincoln, Illinois, with its population of 12,000 residents. There, he joined his mother, Carrie, her new husband, a former cook named Homer Clark, and a two-year-old stepbrother, Gwyn Shannon Clark. Although Hughes and his new, refashioned family did not live in Lincoln long enough for Hughes to begin high school there, the several months he spent there were especially memorable ones for him. The experience of traditional family life with a mother, father, and brother was a world apart from the more lonesome one he knew with his grandmother. It was also in Lincoln that Hughes composed and gave a public reading of his first poem, a sixteen-line tribute to the teachers and
work in Lincoln, had already gone for work in a local steel mill. In Cleveland the family settled into a basement apartment. Unfortunately, prejudiced white landlords charged African Americans more than double the rent that their white tenants paid. Homer and Carrie had little choice but to pay the ridiculous rent that was being demanded for their tiny apartment. To help make the rent, Carrie took on work as a maid. The weight of the family's financial hardships grew heavier, though, when Homer was forced to quit his job at the steel mill. The heat of the mill's furnaces and the dangerously strenuous labor his job required all but ruined Homer's health.

For Hughes, school was a refuge from the unpleasant conditions of the mills where he might have had to find work otherwise, and from his family's cold, compact apartment. Fortunately for Hughes, Cleveland's historic

students at Lincoln's Central School where Hughes held the honored title of eighth-grade class poet. The enormous respect he gained from his teachers and classmates at Central transformed Hughes. "It had never occurred to me to be a poet before," he recalled later on (Big Sea, 24). But his teachers' and peers' adulation of his poetry at the end-of-the-year graduation exercises sealed, in his own mind, an unquestionable poetic future. Lincoln was a short-lived, but extraordinarily significant episode in the young life of a talent who would ultimately mature to the place of black America's greatest poet ever.

Finding Poetry at Central High
At the end of the summer of 1916, Hughes found himself uprooted again and off—with Carrie, Homer, and Gwyn—to Cleveland, Ohio, where Homer, unable to find good
Central High School was one of the best in the city, counting among its storied graduates the likes of oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller. By the time of Hughes's enrollment, Central's student body was a significantly diverse one. The majority of students were children and grandchildren of Cleveland's European immigrants, since Cleveland's wealthy white population had withdrawn from the city to resettle in the suburbs. Some African-American students also attended Central, but their numbers were far from evidencing that black students were an integral part of the rich diversity of Central's students. Despite this, Hughes was at ease there. As a freshman he succeeded brilliantly in school, excelling in graphic art, and he soon distinguished himself as a budding poet. The next year he made Central's track team, but it was in his poetry, which was getting to be more and more of a serious activity, that a greater vigor was coming into view.

In the spring of 1918, Hughes began publishing his first serious verses in the school magazine, the Central High Monthly. Before summer the student editors of the Monthly had accepted six of his poems. Returning to Central in the fall after a miserable summer break spent in South Chicago visiting Carrie—separated from Homer and Gwyn, Hughes joined Monthly's editorial staff. A few months later he became editor in chief of an independent section of the Monthly called the "Belfry Owl." In those days, Hughes recalled writing about "love, about the steel mills where my step-father worked," and "the slums where we lived and the brown girls from the South, prancing up and down Central Avenue on a spring day" (The Big Sea, 28). Modeling his verses after his favorite boyhood poets, Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Carl Sandburg, many of Hughes's early verses were either "little Negro dialect poems" like Dunbar's, or free-verse poems like Sandburg's. Emulating Dunbar, one high school poem went:

Just because I loves you—
That's de reason why
My soul is full of color
Like de wings of a butterfly.

Just because I loves you
That's de reason why
My heart's a fluttering aspen leaf
When you pass by. (The Big Sea, 28-29)

Sandburg, however, was Hughes's "guiding star." Taking Sandburg as a model and, very probably, a broken Homer Clark for his inspiration, Hughes wrote of the steel mills:

The mills
That grind and grind,
That grind out steel
And grind away the lives
Of men—
In the sunset their stacks
Are great black silhouettes
Against the sky.
In the dawn
They belch red fire.
The mills—
Grinding out new steel,
Old men. (The Big Sea, 29)

By the end of his sophomore year at Central, Hughes had become a serious writer.

Hughes's junior and senior years at Central were thrilling. He was voted class poet and became editor of the school yearbook. The track relay team repeated as city champions, and he was reelected to the student council. At the encouragement of his friend, Sartur Andrzejewski, the son of Polish immigrants, Hughes performed in more than one school play. Soon graduation was upon him. With his friends
Not coincidentally, Hughes had a brilliant view of the muddy Mississippi River out of the train’s window. Despite his hesitations about making the trip, Hughes’s journey south was perfectly poetic.

**Summer in Mexico**

The good feeling Hughes and his father first shared when Hughes arrived in Mexico turned sour as soon as James made it clear that he did not plan to pay his son’s college tuition. Instead, James proposed that Hughes study abroad in Switzerland and Germany. There, in James’s vision, Hughes would learn engineering before returning to Mexico to settle down (probably close to James) as a mining engineer. The idea disappointed Hughes. He did not want to become an engineer. His own dream, he told his father, was to become a writer. “A writer?” James asked in disbelief, “Do they make any money?” (Ramperman, 1.43). Writing might be a satisfying hobby, James meant to imply, but no writer he ever heard of—especially no black writer—had earned a living by it. His father’s discouragement deeply dismayed Hughes, but it was not enough to bury his hopes of one day becoming a successful writer.

That summer passed uneventfully. Mostly, Hughes read books, rode horses, feasted on apple cakes, and wrote poems. Although these pastimes were satisfying enough for Hughes, his father’s unbending stubbornness helped him understand what frustrated his mother so much about his father. He also realized how steadfastly his grandmother, whom he missed terribly, encouraged his dreams. In the voice of a brave black mother much like his own (or Mary Langston’s), he wrote:
Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.

Then, as if having this humble mother give the advice he needed so much for himself, the poet went on:

Don't you set down on the steps,
'Cause you find it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
("Mother to Son," Collected Poems, 30)

Pining for his mother and dreaming of Harlem in New York, "the greatest Negro city in the world" (Big Sea, 62), and nearby Columbia University, Hughes nevertheless passed nearly a year in Mexico, happily distracted teaching English to the locals and taking in the weekly bullfights. Before his second summer there had ended, Hughes succeeded in getting a few of his poems and a children's play published, the first fruits of the influential writing career that was to come. Seeing Hughes's success, and the pure delight of his achievement, James finally relented and agreed to send Hughes to Columbia University.

Columbia and Harlem
New York, with its great towers rising up out of the magenta sunset "growing slowly taller and taller" above the water "until they looked as if they could almost touch the sky" (Big Sea, 80), was immediately enthralling. And Harlem, with all its noise, speed, and beautiful black people, took Hughes's breath away. Columbia, he learned, was just a few blocks south of 125th Street, the center of Harlem.

Almost immediately, Hughes discovered he didn't like Columbia. It was Harlem, not college, which fascinated him. The campus was all cold and stone buildings. Because he was "colored," he had no small difficulty getting a dorm room. Though one had been assigned to him when he was accepted, it was revoked when he got to school. Apparently, the housing office at Columbia assumed, because his application had been sent from his father's residence with no hint of his race, that Hughes was Mexican. Though Columbia generously accommodated its foreign students, black students (there were only twelve or so) were barred from living in the campus dormitories. One of the wealthiest colleges anywhere, Columbia was far too exclusive to grant African Americans the social equality of whites that would have been made evident by their living together in the dormitories. Presumably, Columbia's white students and alumni would not have tolerated a racially integrated housing policy. Desperate for a place on campus, and with nothing at all to lose, Hughes protested. Finally, after considerable persistence on the part of Hughes, the housing office gave in and granted him a cold room near a noisy entrance in one of its high-rise dormitories.

The rest of the year went no better. Hughes made few friends at rich Columbia. His classes bored him terribly.
Cruelly, the school newspaper gave him assignments impossible for an African-American student—barred from the fraternity houses and high-society events the paper wanted him to cover—to fill. Only the allure of Harlem, a mecca of black artists, actors, musicians, and race leaders, kept Hughes happy about coming to New York. Soon, it would attract his mother, too. Although they were just as poor in New York as they had been in Cleveland, Hughes and Carrie shared a love for Harlem. There they met some of the most important African Americans of their day, including the most influential race leader and writer of the twentieth century, W. E. B. DuBois, the famous black woman writer Jessie Fauset, and the celebrated poet-musician-diplomat, James Weldon Johnson. To Hughes, especially, Harlem was almost heavenly.

At the beginning of his second school term in 1922, Hughes began planning his move out of the dormitory and into his own place in Harlem. His grades at Columbia were good, but a new life in Harlem was calling. He attended public lectures at the Harlem Branch Library on 135th Street and listened to Harlem’s great poets, Claude McKay and Eric Walrand, read from their works. Inspired by Harlem’s colorful days and dimly lit, jazz-rich nights, Hughes wrote more new poems now than ever. Several were also published. Under a pen name, he published a version of his black dialect poem, “Just Because I Loves You,” one of his Central High works, in the Columbia Spectator magazine. Crisis magazine, published by DuBois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), printed two of his works, “My Loves” and “To a Dead Friend,” as they had “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” a couple of years earlier. A paper in Berlin, Germany, even reprinted one of Hughes’s poems during the months he was getting better acquainted with Harlem. At last, in May Hughes made two important decisions. First, though his father had recently suffered a stroke and was very ill as a result, Hughes had no plans to return to Mexico. Second, he decided he would not return to Columbia in the fall.

The next several months were not at all easy for Hughes. With no more support coming from his father in Mexico, and his mother gone back to Cleveland, money was getting ever more difficult to come by. Racial prejudice was making it next to impossible for Hughes, or any other African-American man, to make a living in New York in 1922. Very few job ads welcomed “colored boys” to apply. Finally, Hughes found work miles outside of Manhattan on Staten Island. The work was tough, but exhilarating just the same. A stranger to farming, Hughes found himself, for the first time in his life, living off the land, “ploughing, hoeing, spreading manure, picking weeds, washing lettuce, beets, carrots, onions, tying them and packing them for market, loading the wagons.” (The Big Sea, 86). All of this Hughes did for fifty dollars per month, including bed and board. It was demanding work, and his bed was only a pile of hay in the corner of a barn, but Hughes liked it for the most part. And what small details he didn’t like, he endured. He knew that living and working on that farm on Staten Island probably saved his life.

The Big Sea
At the end of the harvesting season, Hughes had saved enough money to return to Harlem to purchase an overcoat for the upcoming winter and to rent a room in a boardinghouse. He found work for a short time delivering flowers, but, with a disagreeable shop owner for a boss who reminded him of his father, Hughes found the job unbearable. Early one morning he walked straight away from his duties at Thorley’s flower shop and out to the South Street wharves, looking for a freighter to take him far away from the day-to-day difficulties of earning a living in New York. If a lifetime of earning impossibly low wages...