

HARLEM (1951)

LANGSTON HUGHES (1902-1967)

AUTHOR BIO

Langston Hughes was born to educated parents of mixed-race who had trouble making a living due to the discrimination against African Americans. His father moved to Mexico to pursue better opportunities and eventually became a wealthy rancher. His mother worked as a waitress to make ends meet back in America. In spite of a somewhat unsteady childhood, Hughes proved a skilled student. His peers elected him class poet because “everyone knows, except us, that all Negroes have rhythm, so they elected me as class poet.” But Hughes yearned to be a writer on his own terms, despite his father’s wishes. He dropped out of college and worked odd jobs such as sailor and bellboy until his writing career took off. Although he is remembered most for his poetry, he was prolific in other forms of writing such as plays, short stories, movie screenwriting, and novels. Hughes was a world traveler and had Socialist and Communist sympathies, systems which offered greater equality for blacks. He devoted his life to writing until his death.

BACKGROUND

The Harlem Renaissance became possible when huge numbers of black Americans migrated from the economically depressed South to the urban North following WWI. In the Harlem district of NYC, African Americans of all social classes joined together to express an interest in black culture and social rights through blues, jazz, dance, theater, art, dance and poetry. Civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson described the need for African American artists to find “a form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thought, and the distinctive humor and pathos” of their experience. Harlem also became the center of many important African American Institutions like the NAACP. The Great Depression brought a slow decline to the Harlem Renaissance, though its legacy inspired artists in future generations and shaped black identity.



FAMOUS WORKS

Hughes wrote 2 autobiographies, 16 volumes of poetry, 3 short story collections, 2 novels, 9 children's books, 20 plays, numerous scripts for radio, television and film, and translations. Highlights:

- The “Simple” books about the opinions of an African American “Everyman”
- Montage of a Dream Deferred – poetry collection
- The Weary Blues – poetry collection
- Not Without Laughter – novel
- The Ways of White Folks – short story collection
- Mule Bone – play
- “From Mother to Son” - poem
- “The Negro Dreams of Rivers” – poem
- “Let America be America Again” – poem
- “I Too Sing America” - poem
- I Wonder as I Wander - autobiography

STYLE

Hughes was a key founder of “jazz poetry” – poetry either about jazz and using jazz terms, or mimicking the sounds of jazz music. He incorporated syncopated rhythms, jive language, repeated lines, and loose phrasing to emulate the improvisational style of jazz.

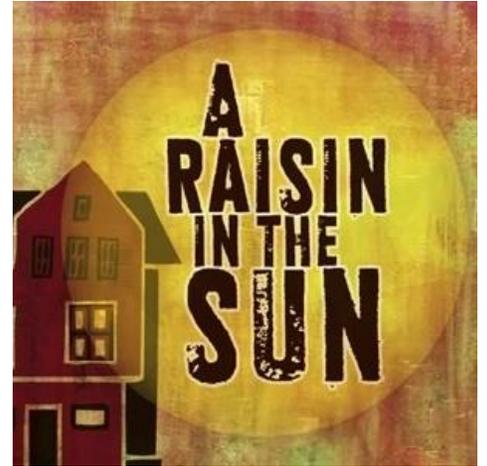
“JAZZ TO ME IS ONE OF THE INHERENT EXPRESSIONS OF NEGRO LIFE IN AMERICA; THE ETERNAL TOM-TOM BEATING IN THE NEGRO SOUL - THE TOM-TOM OF REVOLT AGAINST WEARINESS IN A WHITE WORLD, A WORLD OF SUBWAY TRAINS, AND WORK, WORK, WORK; THE TOM-TOM OF JOY AND LAUGHTER, AND PAIN SWALLOWED IN A SMILE.”

LEGACY

Hughes became one of the best-known Harlem Renaissance artists. While writing about the difficulties and beauties of black experience and using “black” artistic forms (like jazz), his themes also touched on the universal human experience, and were appreciated by a broad audience of all Americans. For example, his poem “Harlem” hints at black uprising if they are too long oppressed (“or does it explode?”), but does not overtly threaten. In fact, despite some pessimistic works about racial relations, Hughes’ overall opinion was that most people are generally good, in any culture around the world. Anyone who has ever had to put a dream on hold can relate to the feelings he evokes in “Harlem.”

“MY SEEKING HAS BEEN TO EXPLAIN AND ILLUMINATE THE NEGRO CONDITION IN AMERICA AND OBLIQUELY THAT OF ALL HUMAN KIND.”

Critics both contemporary and modern argued whether Hughes’s works were “too white” or “too black.” But without question, it is through his eyes that we remember much of the Harlem Renaissance. He inspired generations of writers. One famous example is playwright Lorraine Hansberry, who used a line from “Harlem” as the title for her play about the struggles of an African American family to pursue their dreams (“A Raisin in the Sun”).



OTHER FAMOUS ARTISTS OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

- Claude McKay - poet, novelist, journalist
- Alain LeRoy Locke - writer, philosopher, educator
- Aaron Douglas - painter
- Marcua Garvey - political leader, journalist
- Zora Neale Hurston - author
- Duke Ellington - musician
- Josephine Baker - dancer, singer, fashion icon
- W.E.B. Du Bois - writer, civil rights activist
- Louis Armstrong - musician

THEMES

- American Dream
- The Black Experience
- Racism
- Hope
- Anger and hatred
- Oppression
- Lives of common people
- Jazz
- Harlem