

Langston Hughes: Voice of African-American masses



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GUEST
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The celebration of Black History Month should include the recognition of outstanding African-American literary artists (not just politicians, civil rights leaders, or anti-slavery activists) who left lasting impressions on black American society and pan-African culture. One of the most salient African-American literary artists is James Mercer Langston Hughes.

Born on Feb. 1, 1902, in Joplin, Mo., Langston Hughes had, by the age of 14, produced 16 poems for his junior high school graduation celebration; a year after high school he began publishing poems in *The Brownie's Book* and *The Crisis*, both organs of the NAACP.

In the midst of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s in New York City, he published his global Africanist poem, "The Negro Sings of Rivers."

The Harlem Renaissance had emerged as a result of the great migration of African Americans from the South to the North.

The Harlem Renaissance produced prolific black writers and numerous other artists, politicians and professionals. It also produced two major schools of black literary thought — the radical and the genteel. Those who wrote from the genteel viewpoint — W.E.B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson and others — emphasized successful black American protagonists — lawyers, doctors and the like. Writers in the radical school emphasized the black masses, those without a college education or good grammar. Jamaican Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston from Florida and Langston Hughes wrote from that viewpoint.

Langston Hughes' deep commitment to the lower-class black community is revealed in his use of the language of jazz, the blues and black vernacular, and the theme of black struggle for survival and recognition in their American and universal homeland.

In his classic poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," he depicts the global African in Africa and the United States:

"I bathed in the Euphrates when



Langston Hughes, pictured above, was a novelist, playwright and lyricist — one of the most important writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln

went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy

bosom turn all golden in the sunset."

In his "Mother to Son," Langston Hughes comes down from his African globalist stance to delve into the worries and exhortations of a black mother to her son, expressed in black vernacular:

"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,

Local black history

Many of us have heard of the contributions of Frederick Douglass and Austin Steward to Rochester. However, do you know of an African American who is less famous but who also contributed to this area's development? Write an essay of up to 300 words telling that person's story and send it to M. Kathleen Wagner, Speaking Out editor, Democrat and Chronicle, 55 Exchange Blvd., Rochester, NY 14614-2001; fax, (585) 258-2356; or e-mail, kwagner@DemocratandChronicle.com. Include your name, address and daytime phone number. Speaking Out is planning to publish these essays in February, Black History Month.

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."

Perhaps, because of his own identity crisis as a light-skinned African American, Langston Hughes, in his poem "Cross," depicts a keen awareness of the identity problems of a biracial child:

"My old man's a white old man
And my old mother's black —
My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm gonna die,
Being neither white nor black?"

Lastly, even though Langston Hughes wrote exclusively from the point of view of the black masses, he was deeply aware of the problems of the black American writer, who is often required to cater to race and to the class divisions within the black community itself. Nonetheless, Langston Hughes identified with the downtrodden black masses in fiction and in fact. When he was able to buy a house, he did so in Harlem, instead of taking a class flight, as the black middle class is alleged to often do.

Langston Hughes laughed, danced, sang, wrote and lived among his people until his death in 1967. □

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Langston Hughes Papers

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