Langston Hughes Study Guide

Langston Hughes by Milton Meltzer

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

Langston Hughes has accurately been described as "the Laureate of Black America," and Meltzer's biography is an excellent introduction to his life and work. Hughes's collaboration with Meltzer, first on A Pictorial History of the Negro in America and then on Black Magic: A Pictorial History of the Negro in American Entertainment, led to the development of a solid working relationship that grew into friendship. Hughes recognized that Meltzer's experience in writing and research prepared him for the task of organizing material accumulated over a lifetime, and that Meltzer's essential decency made him an unusually sensitive interpreter of the complexities of race relations in the United States. He felt confident that Meltzer would present his life with fairness and insight when he agreed to Meltzer's request to assist with the writing of a short biography, and he answered Meltzer's questions with as much accuracy as could be expected from a man who has been described as "so private as to conceal his innermost emotions even from himself."

Hughes's sudden death while the project was under way made Meltzer realize that his book would be something of a semiofficial obituary tribute, and although the book is not comprehensive, its concluding chapter offers a concise summary of those aspects of Hughes's life and work that Meltzer especially admired.

The recent publication of the first two volumes of Arnold Rampersad's The Life of Langston Hughes (1986, 1988) has revealed an elusive man even more complex than the portrait in Meltzer's book, but Rampersad's exceptional study has not undermined the essential points that Meltzer makes. In showing the social, familial, and economic pressures Hughes confronted in his quest to become a poet, Meltzer adroitly captures the struggle against constant racial bigotry that all black Americans have faced. Hughes's success as an artist is doubly impressive because of the social obstacles he overcame and because he had little black American literature upon which to draw and few black writers to serve as figures of inspiration.

Since Hughes was born in 1902, his involvement in the major events of the century permits Meltzer to write a historical commentary on the progress of black Americans toward legal guarantees of full constitutional rights from the perspective of a poet who was also an active agent in the struggle, although never a leader. As Meltzer makes clear, Hughes's generally low-key but persistent attempts to address both the artistic and political necessities of black culture represent the kind of quiet strength that contributed as much to the emergence of black consciousness and pride in the 1960s as did the more publicized efforts of other activists.

Hughes's greatest achievements, of course, were as a writer. Throughout his career, he was often neglected by the mass media, which generally focused on only one black literary artist at a time.

Although Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin enjoyed more of the spotlight, Hughes's best work has gradually gained recognition as an important element in modern American literature.

His best short stories, such as "On the Road" (1952), have been anthologized, and his poetry, as noted by critic Kenneth Rexroth, was so deceptively simple and clear that it confused academics who felt great poetry had to be ambiguous and obscure. Hughes was part of an American poetic renaissance, not just a black or Harlem renaissance, and his best poems have an enduring interest. His poems encompass both the experimentalism of his contemporaries, such as e. e. cummings and Marianne Moore, and the more popular lyricism of poets such as Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg.

Ultimately, Hughes expressed the psychological condition of black Americans in the twentieth century with a sharp eye, in a language that combines the rhythms of street speech with the elegance of a skillfully crafted formal poem. He was a pioneer in introducing fundamental aspects of black culture to a larger audience. His relationships with writers, musicians, and dramatists demonstrate how artists—always outsiders to an extent—support and inspire each other. For Hughes, this community, and the community of black people, served as a kind of psychological refuge, a "home" of sorts. And from this position of relative security, he opened the way, as Richard Wright has said, for realism and honesty in twentieth-century black literature.

About the Author

Milton Meltzer was born on May 8, 1915, in Worcester, Massachusetts. Both of his parents immigrated to the United States during the great exodus of Europeans in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and his father was employed as a window cleaner when Meltzer was born. He grew up in a multinational neighborhood near Boston and attended a public school designed to encourage a strong sense of American identity among children of various backgrounds. His family was Jewish but rarely attended religious services, and Meltzer remembers that he identified his own cultural background far more with England than any other country.

Meltzer attended Classical High School, a college preparatory school, and entered Columbia University in 1932 to prepare for a career in education. He studied with such famous professors as anthropologists Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict, and the philosopher John Dewey. He also became an avid theater-goer. He married a young woman from Boston during his junior year, but the marriage did not last long. Because the economic conditions of the Depression made it highly unlikely that he would find a teaching job, he dropped out of Columbia during his senior year. He lived on government relief until his interest in the theater led to a job with the Federal Theater Project.

He had listed his occupation as "unemployed writer" on the application, and he worked on the project until the government abolished the program in 1939.

As World War II began in Europe, Meltzer traveled around the U.S. with two friends, augmenting his university education with visits to mining and logging camps, factories, and migrant worker villages. He returned to New York in 1941 and, after marrying Hilda Balinsky, worked at a variety of odd jobs in the journalism field until he was drafted in 1942. He served in the Army Air Corps for three years as a control tower operator in the U.S., and he continued to develop his skills as a writer by contributing to service magazines and delivering lectures on the nature of democratic and fascist political systems.

In 1945 he combined his theatrical and journalistic interests when he got a job with CBS radio interviewing soldiers returning from the war.

In 1946 he left CBS to work on a committee promoting the unsuccessful presidential candidacy of Henry Wallace, the secretary of agriculture, in the 1948 election. After the 1948 election, he continued to work as a free-lance writer and editor, producing a daily radio program for a national union and writing a column for a labor newsletter.

In 1950 he accepted an assignment as a technical writer for the Pfizer pharmaceutical firm and succeeded in placing a long essay, written with Berton Rouche, in the New Yorker. Pfizer was sufficiently impressed to ask him to develop a public relations staff for the firm, and Meltzer successfully worked in that field for the next few years.

In 1955, the year he turned forty, he felt that although he was enjoying success in the world of business, he was no longer contributing to the social realm.

In an expression of mid-life dissatisfaction, Meltzer said that he felt there was nothing enduring about his writing. He decided to write about the history of black people in America and, in a stroke of great fortune, persuaded the writer Langston Hughes to collaborate on the project. This was the start of a friendship that lasted until Hughes's death. The book they worked on, A Pictorial History of the Negro in America, was published in 1956. Between 1960 and 1968, Meltzer wrote thirteen books, including several volumes for young adults.

During this time, he was also the founder and editor-in-chief of Pediatric Herald, and he continued to work at Pfizer, as well.

In 1968, a year after Hughes's death, Meltzer published a biography of his friend and collaborator. It was nominated for the National Book Award, and Meltzer decided to resign from Pfizer to devote more time to writing. In addition to writing biographical and historical works, he became a planner for several publishers, developing the 25-volume Women in America series for Crowell, the Zenith Black Culture series for Doubleday, and the Firebird History series for Scholastic Books. He also wrote scripts for radio, television, and documentary films, and delivered many seminars at various universities, a source of satisfaction for a man who never completed his own college degree.

In 1973 he became a member of the editorial board of Children's Literature in Education.

Reflecting on his career, Meltzer cites a reviewer's comment that he shows a strong "interest in the underdog" and says that he would characterize his books as examinations of "human aspiration and struggle." His biographies are generally devoted to people who fought for unpopular social or political causes. In the 1980s, he has continued to address similar themes in the numerous works that he has published.

Plot Summary

Langston Hughes was born in Mississippi on February 1, 1902. Soon after his birth, Langston's father abandoned Langston and his mother and moved to Mexico City, where he became a farmer. Langston was then put in his Grandmother's care. His grandmother introduced Langston to the liberating speeches of Booker T. Washington and the strong journalism of W.E.B. DuBois. Unfortunately, she died when he was twelve, and the Reeds, who were family friends, agreed to raise Langston.

After she remarried, Langston reunited with his mother. The new family moved around and eventually settled in Cleveland, where Langston began writing poetry. Hughes spent the next two summers in Mexico with his father, whom he disliked because of his judgmental attitude toward blacks and Mexicans. After the second summer, his father agreed to send Langston to Columbia.

Hughes preferred the streets of Harlem to Columbia, and he soon dropped out of college and traveled the world as a member of several different sailing vessels. He traveled the coast of Africa, and throughout Europe and Asia. Sometimes he traveled as a screenwriter, other times as a journalist, but throughout his journeys, he continued to write and submit poetry.

Langston also explored other aspects of the writing craft; he wrote poems, short stories, novels, autobiographies, anti-war paraphernalia, and children's books. His poem "The Weary Blues" made Hughes a minor celebrity. After the publication of "The Weary Blues," Hughes returned to college, this time at Lincoln University.

After completing college, Hughes became involved in the theater, and his play *Mulatto* became one of the most successful black plays ever written. He helped found several theaters in Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. Hughes' life was filled with curiosity and exploration. Apart from his influence as a writer, Hughes was always involved in his community. He died in 1969 at the age of sixty-seven.

Chapter 1, Wandering

Chapter 1, Wandering Summary

Langston Hughes never considered himself a poet until the age of fourteen, when his grammar school classmates nominated him for class poet. Hughes had not written any poems, but his classmates, who were all white, knew that good poems had rhythm. Since Langston was black, and black people were supposed to have rhythm, Langston's classmates assumed he would be a good poet. He delivered his first poem on graduation day.

Hughes had a mixed family history; both great-grandfathers were white, one a Jewish slave trader and the other a Scottish whiskey maker. His mother's grandfather was a white planter who was said to have descended from Frances Quarles, a seventeenth-century British poet.

Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Mississippi on February 1, 1902. His father, who was a struggling lawyer, left his mother soon after Langston's birth, and traveled south, eventually settling in Mexico City. The following fall, Langston's mother, Carrie, enrolled him at the Harrison Street School, where Langston was the only black student; he was often tormented as a result.

Langston was reunited with his father for a short while, when his mother and he moved to Mexico City. However, after experiencing an earthquake, Mrs. Hughes and Langston moved back to Kansas, where Langston was put in the care of his grandmother, Mary.

Mary Langston was a proud woman who refused to cook, clean, or wash for rich white families. Instead, she made her living by renting rooms to college students who went to the University of Kansas. Langston's grandmother took Langston to hear Booker T. Washington speak at the University. Although Langston could not understand what Washington was saying, he was inspired by Washington's power. Hughes was also inspired by the words of W.E.B. Du Bois, then editor of *The Crisis,* an African American magazine that Hughes' grandmother had introduced to him. When Langston Hughes was twelve-years-old, his grandmother died.

Chapter 1, Wandering Analysis

This chapter lays the foundation for several recurring themes in this biography. First, the division of white and black is introduced. This theme will occur throughout the book, but is first introduced through the explanation of Hughes' lineage. Hughes is not completely black, because both of his great-grandfathers and one of his grandfathers were white. Langston is of mixed descent and will struggle with this race dichotomy throughout his life. Langston learns to deal with racial differences at an early age, because he attended an all white grammar school.

Hughes' unsettled family life is also introduced in this chapter, and it will be a recurring issue for the rest of his life. His father is a perpetually distant figure and his mother is financially and emotionally insecure.

Chapter 2, Brass Spittoons

Chapter 2, Brass Spittoons Summary

After his grandmother's death, the Reeds, who were family friends, cared for Langston.

Langston helped with the housework, which included setting hens and driving cows to pasture. He also sold papers and worked at a local hotel. The hotel paid him fifty cents a week, and he used this money to go to the theater, where he enjoyed thrillers and Charlie Chaplin comedies. One day, Langston was denied admittance because of his color, so he began watching movies at the opera house. Langston also enjoyed watching Saturday football games at the University of Kansas. Sometimes Langston would sneak into the medical school building and watch students dissect cadavers.

Auntie Reed insisted that Langston go to church every Sunday. Langston, who had been raised a Methodist, liked the Reeds' Baptist church. One day, during a revival at the church, all the children were seated in the front row of the church as the entire congregation prayed for their souls. One by one the children approached the altar and claimed to be saved. Langston, who hadn't felt God's call, approached the altar and pretended to be saved. That evening he cried himself to sleep.

Chapter 2, Brass Spittoons Analysis

Langston's unsettled home life once again appears in this chapter. While living with the Reeds, Langston begins working and will not stop until the day he dies. Hughes' determination is seen even at an early age. This determination is the driving force behind Hughes' work, and the reason he was such a prolific writer.

Hughes' is a highly curious individual. His desire to watch movies, football games, and people dissecting cadavers never fades. Langston is a curious individual whose curiosity is often integrated into his work.

The final portion of this chapter tells something about Hughes' religious side. The young Hughes does not feel saved by the church. Throughout his life, he will be a spiritual individual, but he will not be a religious individual, and he comes in conflict with several religious leaders.

Chapter 3, Homesick Blues

Chapter 3, Homesick Blues Summary

When he was fourteen, Langston's mother, who had just remarried, sent for Langston, and he joined his mother, stepfather, and stepbrother in Lincoln, Illinois. Langston had little interest in poetry, and liked only Longfellow and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. He would rather read fiction, especially Westerns, and he had not yet become interested in writing.

Langston's mother, however, wrote and performed verse for church programs. Langston recalled an incident when his mother dressed him up on stage and had him act out a role. He became bored and started rolling his eyes and giggling. The audience laughed, but afterwards his mother whipped him and taught him a lesson about respecting other people's art.

Chapter 3, Homesick Blues Analysis

Hughes reunites with his mother in this chapter. The reader learns more about Hughes' history as writer. However, Hughes is still disinterested in most poetry at this point in his life. He has not yet become a serious artist, however, with the help of his mother, he has begun to understand, or at least respect, art. This lesson in respect will later translate into Hughes' open-minded attitude on life, which is important to his poetry and writing.

Chapter 4, Central High

Chapter 4, Central High Summary

Langston's stepfather, Homer Clarke, eventually found work at a Steel Mill in Cleveland, and Langston and his mother moved to join him in that city. Unable to stand the heat of the steel furnaces, Homer soon accepted a job as a janitor. Langston's mother was employed as a maid.

Langston was enrolled at Central High School, where the students were predominantly from poor families, but not necessarily black. Langston was an active member of several teams and clubs, including; the track team, the French Club, Student Council, the American Civics Association, the school paper, and the Home Garden Club. He also became involved in the Karamu House, a community center that was built around the corner from his house. Here, he learned painting and ceramics, but was still disinterested in writing and poetry.

Hughes also became interested in social issues, and attended a rally given by Eugene V. Debs, a Socialist leader who was opposed to World War I. After he found out about Langston's participation in the rally, Langston's principal questioned how "a good American could go to Debs rally and associate with people opposed to the war."

While working at a soda fountain, Langston observed many different views on the war. He was also greatly influenced by Helen Chesnutt, daughter of writer Charles W. Chesnutt. She sponsored the Garden Club, to which Hughes belonged. Miss Ethel Weimer, an English teacher, introduced Langston to the poetry of Carl Sandburg, and Hughes became interested in his future craft.

After another separation with his stepfather, Hughes' mother moved to Chicago, and Langston joined her the following summer. Soon after arriving in the city, Hughes was beaten by some white children because he was in their territory. Ashamed that he had been beaten, Langston allowed his mother and doctor to believe that his swollen jaw was a result of mumps.

In the fall, Langston returned to Cleveland, where he supported himself on hot dogs and rice, and became interested in a variety of subjects, including poetry, literature, and philosophy. He began writing poetry, "as though he couldn't help himself." He attempted to submit his poems to several magazines, but was always rejected.

Chapter 4, Central High Analysis

Hughes' life is always chaotic; he is constantly moving or changing jobs. This chaos is representative of the war time era and of his struggle as an African American trying to survive in a white society. Again, as his mother separates from his stepfather, we see a fragmentation of Hughes' family life.

In school, Langston is involved in many clubs. Hughes will continue to be an involved individual. His future projects will always return to the community, especially Harlem, for which he has an exceptional love. The Debs rally is the first, but not the last, incidence that Hughes' social beliefs come into conflict with other aspects of his life. Later, his social beliefs will become a part of his writings, which will at times be controversial. Hughes begins writing poetry for the first time because, "he could not help

himself." This is a sign that Langston is becoming an artist.

Chapter 5, Hurry Up! Hurry Up!

Chapter 5, Hurry Up! Hurry Up! Summary

When he was a junior in high school, Langston's mother and his stepfather reunited in Cleveland. One day Langston and a white friend went to a cafeteria for lunch. His friend's meal cost forty-five cents; Langston's, according to the clerk, would cost him eight dollars and sixty-five cents; the price for being black. Humiliated, Langston left his food at the counter and sat down to watch his friend eat.

That spring, Langston was invited to spend the summer with his father, James Hughes, in Toluca, Mexico. He did, and soon found that his father was a cold man, who only cared about making money. His father hated American blacks and Mexicans, saying they were lazy and foolish. Disgusted by his father's attitude, Langston soon came down with the 'blues.' His father offered to take Langston to Mexico City for the bullfights, but Langston was too sick to go. He never told anybody, including the doctor, that his sickness derived from a hatred of his father. At the end of the summer, Langston returned to the United States. After crossing into the country, Langston was denied a sleeping car on the train because he was black.

Chapter 5, Hurry Up! Hurry Up! Analysis

Langston's 'blackness' continues to be an issue. The incident in the cafeteria is another reminder that Hughes is considered black, while he is in America. When he is in other countries Langston will be considered dark-skinned. This is an issue because no matter where Langston goes, he is considered an outsider due to the color of his skin.

Langston reunites with his father for the summer. He admittedly does not like his father because of his drive for money and his racist views. Because of this dislike, and in addition to the continual separation of his mother and stepfather, Hughes will never have a secure father figure. At the end of the chapter, Hughes is reminded of his 'blackness' when he is denied a sleeping car because of his color.

Chapter 6, I've Known Rivers

Chapter 6, I've Known Rivers Summary

Langston returned to Cleveland at the end of the 'Red Summer,' so named because of the violence against blacks that ensued in the post war environment. During his senior year of high school, Langston was elected editor of the yearbook, and class poet. Several of his poems were published in the school newspaper.

Although his High School had readied him for college, Langston had little chance of going on with his education because he did not have much money. However, a letter from his father, who wanted him to come to Mexico again for the summer, hinted at an opportunity to pursue a college education. His mother wanted him to get a job in Cleveland, but Langston chose to return to Mexico. On the train ride to Mexico, Langston wrote one of his better-known poems, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers."

His summer in Toluca was not a bad one, because his father was rarely around. Langston passed the time by reading, improving his Spanish, and riding horses. His father approached Langston one day and said he wanted him to go to college and become a mining engineer. Langston replied that he wanted to be a writer, and an argument concerning Langston's future continued throughout the summer.

Langston accepted a job teaching English in a private business school and in a girls' finishing school. He also began writing short prose and plays for children. In January 1921, "A Negro Speaks of Rivers" was published in *The Crisis*. After seeing his son's publishing success, Mr. Hughes agreed to send his son to Columbia University in New York.

Chapter 6, I've Known Rivers Analysis

Langston has officially become a published poet. *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* is one of Hughes' most famous works. The division between Langston and his father continues to grow, and the relationship held together merely by the promise of education. His father is a selfish man whose life is dedicated to acquiring wealth. He agrees to fund Langston's education only after he sees that the family name, his name, might gain some notoriety through the work of his son. Because of his dislike of his father, Langston becomes his converse; spurning money, caring for others, and becoming involved with his own people.

Chapter 7, Columbia vs. Harlem

Chapter 7, Columbia vs. Harlem Summary

Langston spent his first evening in New York at the YMCA. He spent his first week in the city exploring Harlem. When he showed up to claim his room key at Columbia, he was told that blacks were not allowed in the dormitories, but Hughes persisted, and was allowed to stay on campus. Langston's only friend at Columbia was Chun, a Chinese student. After a while, Langston stopped going to classes, and became more interested in Harlem than Columbia. Harlem was Hughes' real life classroom.

Langston's poems continued to appear in *The Crisis*, and that winter "Negro" was published. Realizing that Hughes was in New York City, the editors of *The Crisis*, including Du Bois, set up a meeting with the young man. Langston showed up to the meeting with his mother, who had been living in New York City.

His poems were continuously published in magazines, and Langston dropped out of Columbia and began working once more. He had several positions before he decided to get a job on a ship in order to see the world. His first job on a ship was mess boy, and the ship only traveled a few hours up the Hudson. It was then that Hughes wrote another famous poem, "The Weary Blues," which was published in the *Amsterdam News* on April 8, 1923. Langston eventually got a job on the S.S. West Hesseltine, a freighter headed to Africa. He had brought a box of books for this journey, but decided the books were a part of his past. As a symbolic act, Hughes threw the books one by one into the sea.

Chapter 7, Columbia vs. Harlem Analysis

Langston's 'blackness' constantly sets up barriers, and even at Columbia University, he cannot escape the prejudices of a white society. Always optimistic, Hughes learns to channel his frustration into other outlets; in this case his poetry. Despite his acceptance into the acclaimed university, Hughes prefers to do his studying on the streets. Hughes will remain an urban, rather than scholarly, poet throughout his life. His urbaneness is what makes him accessible to a wide audience. He is not so much concerned with the craft of poetry as he is with readability. Once again highlighting his desire remain grounded, Langston drops out of college and begins exploring the world.

The symbolic act of throwing his books overboard tells a great deal about Langston's character: he was not one to linger on the past; rather, he focused on the present and the future in all his writings. This future oriented point of view appears as optimism in much of his work and his life.

Chapter 8, Africa

Chapter 8, Africa Summary

His job aboard the *S.S. West Hesseltine* was to watch over the petty officers' mess and make up their staterooms. After docking in Dakar, Africa, Hughes was pleased to find that Africa was not as primitive as the movies had portrayed. However, just as in America, Langston was discriminated against because of the color of his skin. In Africa, Hughes, because of his mixed heritage, was considered "colored," not black. This hurt Hughes deeply, and the only friend he could make in Africa was a sixteen-year-old mulatto boy, about whom he wrote "Cross." Hughes saw many parts of the African coast, including: the Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast, the Slave Coast, the Niger, the Congo, the Bight of Benin, Calabar, and the Cameroons.

Langston was invited to the house of a Mjohammedan trader, who showed him statues, cloth, ivory, exotic animal hides and bird feathers. Shortly thereafter, the ship, which was running low on supplies, began its return trip to America. Because they had traded much of their food for alcohol and women, the crew was forced to eat worm-ridden oatmeal for much of the return trip. The ship arrived at New York in the autumn.

Chapter 8, Africa Analysis

Langston's 'blackness' comes into question once again in this chapter. In Africa, he is 'colored,' not 'black.' There is irony in this because in America, Hughes is discriminated against for being African American, but in Africa he is discriminated against for not being African American enough. The title 'mulatto' haunts him throughout his life. Despite his rejection, Hughes' love of his own and others' heritage deepens because of his trip to Africa.

Chapter 9, A Garret in Paris

Chapter 9, A Garret in Paris Summary

Langston purchased a new suit and coat and traveled to McKeesport, Pennsylvania, where his mother and stepfather were living. He visited for a while, and then returned to New York in search of another sailing vessel. He was employed as a mess boy on a freighter that ran between New York and Holland. After one and a half trips, Langston had had enough of the ocean and asked for his pay, then traveled to Paris.

His first few months in Paris were difficult; he could not find a job because he wasn't Parisian, and his mother could not send him a loan. Eventually he got a job as a doorman at a nightclub. The job was unsatisfying, and, with the help of Rayford Logan, a fan of Hughes' poetry, Hughes got another job as a second cook in a nightclub called the Grand Duc. Langston enjoyed the job because he could listen to live jazz music while he worked. Hughes was eventually promoted to waiter. He continued sending poems back to America and he began receiving money for his poetry.

While in Paris, Langston had two love affairs: the first with a Russian dancer, and the second with the daughter of a businessman. The dancer was called away on work, and the businessman's daughter was called back to London by her father, who did not like Langston. Dr. Alain Locke, professor of philosophy at Howard University and a lead figure in the Black Renaissance, visited Hughes in Paris. Locke told Hughes he was putting together a "New Negro" anthology, and that he would like to include some of Hughes' poems.

The Grand Duc closed down, and Langston agreed to travel to Italy with his waiter friend, Romeo. Langston met up with Dr. Locke in Venice, where he was taken to museums. On the train ride back to Paris, Langston is robbed.

He became a beachcomber, searching the docks for employment and discarded food. However, because he was black, he was unable to find work on a ship until an all black sailing ship agreed to take him back to New York if he agreed to work for free. Hughes agreed, and was soon in New York City once again.

Chapter 9, A Garret in Paris Analysis

Langston continues to see the world and allow his experiences to influence his artistry. He visits Europe, where he is still subject to the color line. Hughes' poetry has started to be noticed, and the inclusion of his work in Locke's anthology, in addition to the earlier meeting with DuBois, is a sign that important people are starting to appreciate Langston.

Langston is a cultured individual, who has just begun to experience the world. Although much of his writing concerns the African American population, he is clearly an individual

who has seen many different cultures. The differences between how his own culture is treated in relation to others often fuels Hughes' work.

Chapter 10, Busboy Poet

Chapter 10, Busboy Poet Summary

When he returned to New York, Langston was introduced to several important figures of the era. These included Countee Cullen, Arna Botemps, James Weldon Johnson, and Carl Van Vechten. He also received twenty dollars from *The Crisis* for past work. He used this money go to the theater and to purchase a train ticket to Washington, where his mother was staying with middle-class relatives. He worked several menial jobs in Washington, but found that Jim Crow laws were still prevalent. Langston did not like his middle-class relatives, finding that they were snobby and indifferent to black suffering.

After a short-lived job at a laundry, Hughes was employed by Dr. Woodson, founder of the association for the Study of Negro Life and History. Hughes did not like the job, which was primarily a filing position, and quit to become a busboy at the Wardman Park Hotel. While working at the hotel, Langston learned that a famous poet named Vachel Lindsay was staying in one of the rooms. When Lindsay was eating breakfast one morning, Hughes dropped three of his poems on Lindsay's table. The following day, a group of reporters was waiting for Hughes when he showed up to work; Lindsay had mentioned Hughes in one of his speeches.

Hughes' success continued: he won first prize in *Opportunity* magazine's literary contest and two more prizes from *The Crisis.* Alfred A. Knopf, a well-known publisher, accepted Hughes as a client, and arranged to publish a book of Hughes' poetry. Hughes looked at several colleges, including Howard and Harvard, before finally settling on Lincoln University. He could not afford to pay his own way, but Amy Spingarn of *The Crisis*, who felt that a full scholarship to Harvard was not for Langston, agreed to pay Hughes' tuition to Lincoln.

Chapter 10, Busboy Poet Analysis

This chapter demonstrates Hughes' resistance to the upper classes. Although Hughes has been introduced to many sophisticated middle and upper class individuals, he never loses touch with the reality of the streets. He does not wish to rise in class, rather, he would stay where he is and help those around him rise in station. This is why Hughes is considered a people's poet.

Hughes fame continues to rise in this chapter. He is ambitious when it comes to advertising his poetry, but his motives for doing so are completely unselfish. As stated in the previous paragraph, Hughes is not interested in raising himself, but in raising those around him. Yet another example of Hughes' rejection of status and class is his rejection of a full scholarship to Harvard.

Chapter 11, College Man

Chapter 11, College Man Summary

Lincoln was a prestigious school for blacks. Because many of the all white faculty members had gone to Princeton, it was known as the "black Princeton." Hughes took courses in education and literature, as well as, French, German, Spanish, and a variety of other courses. Among his classmates were Cab Calloway and future Supreme Court justice, Thurgood Marshall.

Because of his mild celebrity attributed to "The Weary Blues," Hughes was severely hazed when he first attended Lincoln. His second year at the college was more productive. Hughes became involved in many activities, including: the school paper, the track team, and poetry readings.

During his senior year of college, Langston wrote a sociology paper on the demographics of Lincoln's campus, which consisted of a white faculty and black students. According to his findings, over sixty-percent of the students felt it was better that way because blacks were somehow not as good as whites. He also stated that Lincoln neglected courses on African American history, art, and literature.

Chapter 11, College Man Analysis

Hughes continues to get involved with the community around him. He is perpetually interested in his world and chooses to become part of it. Hughes was always a sociologist. The senior sociology paper he wrote was just one way Hughes observed his environment. By this point, Hughes had seen many different societies, and sociology was therefore second nature to him. He was an inquisitive thinker, and throughout his works one can find the inklings of an individual who questioned the way things were.

Chapter 12, Black Renaissance

Chapter 12, Black Renaissance Summary

After his first year at Lincoln, Hughes rented a room in Harlem for the summer. During this time he met with many important literary figures of the Black Renaissance, including Aaron Douglas, Zora Neale Hurston, John P. Davis, and Gwendolyn Bennet. This group of individuals decided to create a black magazine of the arts called *Fire*. Langston found work as a song lyricist for a musical revue; however, the revue was never seen.

Hughes continued to write poetry throughout this time period, and "Mulatto" and "A House in Taos" were published during that summer. "A House in Taos" won first place in an annual Intercollegiate Undergraduate Poetry Contest. When *Fire* was finally published at the end of the summer, it was received with mixed reviews. Blacks found the magazine to be crippling to black society, whereas many white critics found the magazine to be liberating. *Fire* was published only one time.

In February of 1927, Langston released his second book of poems, which was entitled *Fine Clothes to the Jew*. Although the title was not intended to be offensive, many people were disgusted by its connotations. Langston would later regret his choice of titles. *Fine Clothes to the Jew* was received warmly, and Margaret Larkin of *Opportunity* said of Hughes that he "is doing for the Negro race what Burns did for the Scotch - squeezing out the beauty and rich warmth of a noble people into enduring poetry."

Chapter 12, Black Renaissance Analysis

Hughes the student becomes Hughes the poet. This chapter recounts a very poetically prolific time in Hughes' life. He becomes absorbed in a society of poets, becoming socially and artistically involved with many important writers of the day.

"Mulatto" is an important poem of Hughes' because it speaks of an issue that was very close to home for the poet, mixed race. Langston dealt with this issue all his life, because his great-grandfathers were both white and the idea of mixed race was incorporated into much of his poetry and writing. This dichotomy of race grants Langston a dual perspective - one that is both black, and white. It is perhaps because of this that Hughes was able to break down the color barrier in his own mind.

Chapter 13, Not Without Laughter

Chapter 13, Not Without Laughter Summary

At the end of his sophomore year, Fisk College paid Hughes a sizable fee to read his poems at their college. He spent his earnings touring the American south for the entirety of that summer, first heading to Memphis and then to Baton Rouge, where a flood had left 750,000 people homeless. While in Baton Rouge, He visited a camp for refugees, but soon became depressed by the racism he witnesses, even in the midst of disaster. Hughes traveled to New Orleans.

In New Orleans, Hughes took a job as a mess boy on a freighter that traveled to Havana. When he returned, he spent a few weeks exploring the French Quarter, and then headed back toward Lincoln for his junior year of college. Langston stayed on Lincoln's campus the following summer in order to complete his first novel. A wealthy white woman named Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason, who was a patron for many black artists, paid for his expenses. Hughes spent the summer and the rest of his senior year of college trying to complete the novel. In July of 1930, *Not Without Laughter* appeared in bookstores. Soon thereafter, Langston would break with his patron.

After he wrote a poem called "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria," which Mrs. Mason did not like, Langston decided he could no longer accept his patron's money. They did not have the same artistic goals. Mrs. Mason became angry, and Hughes was once again reminded that everything boiled down to white and black.

Chapter 13, Not Without Laughter Analysis

Hughes continues to enrich his world-view by exploring the American South and Cuba.

Hughes publishes his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*. It was a good title for Hughes to give it, since Hughes' life seems to be one "not without laughter." The optimism of humor is a theme that Langston revisits repeatedly in his work. The breakup with Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason reminds the reader that Hughes is not out to climb in social classes; he is a people's poet who writes what he feels, not what will be printed.

Chapter 14, People Need Poetry

Chapter 14, People Need Poetry Summary

Although Langston had studied to become a teacher, he found that his interest in teaching was gone after he'd graduated college. He was posed with a difficult decision - writing material he had no interest in writing. A four hundred dollar prize for *Not Without Laughter* gave Hughes some time to think about his future. So he and Zell Ingram, a friend from Cleveland, decided to travel to the South.

In Daytona Beach, they stopped to visit Bethune-Cookman, an all black college that had been founded by Mary McLeod Bethune. Mrs. Bethune asked Langston to read some of his poetry to the students, which he did. After observing the students' responses to Hughes' poetry, Bethune suggested the poet go on the lecture circuit and recite his poetry to people throughout the country.

Zell and Langston continued south to Key West, where they took a boat to Cuba and then Haiti, where Langston was appalled by the extreme poverty of the Haitian people. After spending the summer in Haiti, Zell and Hughes returned to the United States and to Mrs. Bethune's college. She told them she was headed to Washington, and asked if she could have a ride, since they were headed north. Zell and Hughes agreed.

The trio stopped at a black school in South Carolina, where Bethune convinced Langston to read some of his poetry at an assembly. He did, and was accepted warmly by the audience. After the reading, Mrs. Bethune said to Langston, "This is what you have to do...People need poetry."

Chapter 14, People Need Poetry Analysis

The ever-curious Hughes continues to explore the world. With the help of Mary Bethune, he learns that his poetry can affect great numbers of people in positive ways by speaking to audiences. Because Hughes' goal has always been to positively influence his community, he seriously considers the speaking circuit.

Chapter 15, Jim Crowe Southern Style

Chapter 15, Jim Crowe Southern Style Summary

After they returned to New York City, Langston began planning for a poetry-reading tour. He wrote to the Rosenwood Fund and received a thousand dollar grant for his tour. Then Hughes purchased a Ford, and asked his friend, Radcliffe Lucas, to drive and act as manager for the tour. His friend agreed, and, in October of 1931, they set off toward the South.

The tour took Langston to colleges, high schools, and local meeting places. Because they were often unwelcome in hotels, Lucas and Hughes spent most of their evenings as guests in black households. As they got deeper into the South, the color line became more apparent. Langston's poem, "Christ in Alabama," appeared in the school paper of an all white college the day Hughes was to recite there. This poem, which refers to Christ as a black man, outraged many members of the all white community. After this, Hughes would not be invited to any more white colleges.

Hughes also visited Tuskeegee, an all black school that had been founded by Booker T. Washington. Despite the school's prestige, students and members of the faculty were not allowed to vote or eat in restaurants. Hughes found this difficult to swallow. While in Tuskeegee, Hughes visited nearby Scottsboro, and he recited poetry to the black boys who were in prison as part of the Scottsboro trial. As a means to promote public interest in this case, Hughes wrote a play entitled *Scottsboro Limited*, which was performed once in New York.

In May of 1932, Hughes was asked to become a writer for a Hollywood movie, which was to be filmed using Russian language. Because he wanted to experiment with different forms of writing, and because he had always wanted to work in Hollywood, Hughes accepted this offer.

Chapter 15, Jim Crowe Southern Style Analysis

Hughes continues to become more socially conscious. He works to become a significant figure in the community. Langston also becomes stronger and his words become more disputative. This tour represents a shift in Hughes' thinking - from this point on, he will peacefully push back those forces that push against him and his community.

Chapter 16, Around the World

Chapter 16, Around the World Summary

Hughes found the script, which was written by a Russian, to be a highly inaccurate portrayal of America, and he insisted that it be changed. Hughes and the crew were sent to Odessa in order to film some cotton-picking scenes. However, soon afterwards, the studio dropped the film.

Langston decided to use his pay to travel through Asia. As a reporter, he traveled to Turkmenistan in Central Asia, which was largely unpopulated. While in Ashkhabad, he met a white reporter named Arthur Koestler. Koestler, who wrote for German newspapers, suggested they team up and travel together. They did, and explored the colored regions of Asia. When they arrived in Tashkent, Koestler returned to Moscow, and Langston began selling his poems, which were translated into Uzbek. Eventually, Hughes returned to Moscow, where he wrote and sold articles about his travels in Russia.

Langston decided to travel eastward toward home, but needed a permit to cross the Soviet Union. While waiting for his permit, he came across a copy of some short stories by D.H. Lawrence. These stories were so inspiring, that Hughes immediately began writing stories of his own. He completed "Cora Unashamed," which was selected for Obrien's Best Short Stories of 1934.

The permit arrived, and Hughes traveled to Vladivostok via the Trans-Siberian Express. He took a boat to Tokyo, and then to Shanghai, where he spent much of his time with black musicians and entertainers. Fifteen months after arriving in Asia, Hughes boarded a ship bound for San Francisco.

Chapter 16, Around the World Analysis

Hughes' unceasing curiosity takes him all over Asia. Always a poet and excellent promoter of his own work, Langston manages to have many poems translated into Uzbek. This is a demonstration of Hughes' resilience - he was always capable of self-survival, even in the most foreign of situations. For the first time, Langston becomes a reporter and a short story writer. He begins to explore his tremendous versatility through these forms, and will soon expand his horizons to different mediums.

Chapter 17, Dream Deferred

Chapter 17, Dream Deferred Summary

He returned to the United States in the midst of the Great Depression. Since he had been doing well as a short story writer in Russia, Hughes continued writing stories when he returned to the states. Noel Sullivan, an old friend of Hughes', put him up in a cottage in Carmel, California, where Hughes wrote prolifically. The result of this writing was a book of short stories entitled *The Ways of White Folks*, which was published by Knopf in 1934.

While in Carmel, Hughes also became involved with anti-war campaigns, writing and handing out pamphlets to the public. After the publication of his book, Langston traveled to Reno, Nevada, where he took a room in a black boardinghouse. He thought about his father, and thought that he should write to him soon.

When he awoke the next morning, Langston received a telegram from Mexico City saying that his father was dead and that the burial would be delayed until his arrival in Mexico. Langston, however, was not mentioned in the will. After his father's burial, Langston remained in Mexico for the winter. He socialized with many of Mexico's popular artists, including Diego Rivera, David Siquieros, and Jose Orozco.

He returned to Watts, California in the summer and wrote a children's book about Mexico with his friend Arna Botempts, who had formerly helped him write *Popo and Fifina,* a children's story about Haiti. The new children's book was unsuccessful, and a second attempted book was equally unsuccessful. When Langston received word that his mother was sick, he went to meet her in Oberlin, Ohio, where she had moved to be with distant cousins.

Her illness continued to worsen, and Langston spent everything he had to care for his mother. Fortunately, he won the Guggenheim Fellowship for his writing, which also went toward his mother's expenses. That fall, when Langston went to New York in order to sell some stories, he found that his play *Mulatto* was to appear on Broadway. Hughes' first major play was welcomed by critics. *Mulatto* ran for a year on Broadway and several seasons on the road. At that time, it was the most successful play ever written by an African American.

Chapter 17, Dream Deferred Analysis

Hughes continues to explore different mediums in this chapter. He also begins to vocalize his political views in the form of anti-war paraphernalia. His curiosity, which had formerly been shown by his world travels, now appears in his work. Langston continues to become involved in society, and express his views. Langston also explores the medium of children's books, which go along with Hughes' main philosophy of guiding the community in every possible form. Although his mother had rarely been a mother,

Hughes cares for her without question. This is a testament to Hughes' resilience and his amazing ability to forgive.

Chapter 18, Rehearsal

Chapter 18, Rehearsal Summary

Langston and his mother moved back to Chicago, where his mother received good care at reasonable prices from a black physician. Hughes' plays were performed at Karamu, which, since his youth, had become a theater company. He continued to submit plays to Broadway, with little success, except for *The Prodigal Son*.

Chapter 18, Rehearsal Analysis

Hughes continues to look after his mother. He also remains involved in the Chicago community where he spent part of his youth. Karamu is the first theater where Langston becomes a playwright.

Chapter 19, The Bloody Spanish Earth

Chapter 19, The Bloody Spanish Earth Summary

In the spring of 1937 Hughes traveled to Spain as a correspondent for the *African American*, a Baltimore based publication. Hughes was to report about African Americans and their role in the war in Spain. This was a dangerous assignment, and Hughes filled out his will before leaving for Paris in July. The day after arriving in France, he headed for Barcelona, which had recently been bombed by German and Italian aircraft.

Barcelona was a war zone, and for six months, Hughes lived near the front line. He talked to American soldiers in the International Brigade, an interracial company of soldiers. During this time, Langston wrote "Tomorrow's Seed," a poem dedicated to these soldiers. Hughes also spent some time in Madrid, where he stayed at the Alianza, a large mansion that housed many artists. Madrid was also a war zone, but its people lived out their lives as normal. Many of the artists at the Alianza fought the war with their artistic talents, writing or painting for the cause. Langston left Madrid for Valencia early one December morning. He soon boarded a train for France.

He stayed in Paris throughout the Christmas holiday, and became reacquainted with many friends, including Jacques Roumains, Henri Cartierr-Bresson, and Pierre Seghers.

On New Years Eve, Hughes wandered the cold streets of Paris and reminisced about all the places he had been.

Chapter 19, The Bloody Spanish Earth Analysis

Hughes once again takes on the role of socially conscious reporter. He expands his worldview by experiencing World War II. Taking up where he left off in California, Hughes uses his artistry to become part of the anti-war campaign in Madrid. This is yet another example that Hughes was not afraid to become involved in his environment; wherever he was, he was involved.

Chapter 20, Theater in a Suitcase

Chapter 20, Theater in a Suitcase Summary

When he returned to Harlem in January of 1938, Langston helped build a theater for blacks called the Harlem Suitcase Theater, which was perhaps New York's first theater-in-the-round. The first play produced by the theater was Hughes' *Don't you Want To Be Free?* a highly poetic play in which Langston included twelve of his poems. *Don't You Want to Be Free?* ran for a record one hundred and thirty-five consecutive performances - the longest ever for a Harlem based play. Langston's plays became more socially relevant, as he began to write about current events. Hughes continued to aid his friends in Spain, and translated and published some of Garcia Lorca's poems.

He founded another theater in Los Angeles called the New Negro Theater. The theater opened with *Don't You Want to Be Free?* Hughes wrote a screenplay for Hollywood, but left the city for Chicago soon after its completion. After a short period at the Hotel Grand in Chicago, Langston returned to Carmel, asking for a loan from Knopf, his publisher, for the completion of his autobiography. The autobiography, entitled *The Big Sea,* appeared on bookshelves in the fall of 1940 and was warmly received by many critics, including Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright.

After the publication of his autobiography, Hughes returned to writing for the stage, and applied for and received a fellowship for the production of historic African American plays. He spent some time at his friend Noel Sullivan's farm, where he compiled a series of short stories later published in *Laughing to Keep from Crying*. In 1942, Hughes returned to Harlem and became involved with the anti-war efforts, writing verses and slogans to help sell war bonds. That year, Hughes published another book of poetry, *Shakespeare in Harlem*.

Chapter 20, Theater in a Suitcase Analysis

When he returns to the United States, Hughes becomes involved in the theater again. He goes back to where he feels most comfortable, Harlem, and immediately expands the views of those in his community. At the Suitcase Theater, Hughes premiers his play *Don't You Want to be Free?* This is the first time Langston combines two media, using both poetry and play to communicate his message.

Hughes remains globally aware, translating Spanish anti-war poems. Again becoming involved in the community, Hughes helps open a theater in Los Angeles. Always experimenting with different means of communication, Langston tries a new form of writing, autobiography. As if to demonstrate his versatility, Hughes published a book of short stories and a book of poetry in that same year.

Chapter 21, Poems-And Politics

Chapter 21, Poems-And Politics Summary

Hughes' poetry was often infused with political or religious propaganda that occasionally got the poet into trouble. On several occasions, his readings were cancelled due to public outbursts. One such occasion occurred in November of 1940, when Hughes was scheduled to speak at a Book and Author luncheon. Aimie Semple Macpherson, an evangelist, found out about Hughes' appearance and, after reading his poem "Goodbye Christ," said, "There are many devils, but the most dangerous of all is the red devil. And now there comes among us a red devil in a black skin!" Langston left the luncheon without reading his poetry.

Another incident occurred in Gary, Indiana, where the colored teachers of a school were told they'd be fired if Hughes, an assumed communist, read his poetry. However, the FBI assured the school board that Hughes was not a communist, and he was allowed to speak. In March of 1953, Hughes was summoned before the McCarthy committee because of radical poetry. He was asked to give the names of people whom he knew to be communists, but Langston refused.

Chapter 21, Poems-And Politics Analysis

Langston's response to Macpherson demonstrates his extraordinary patience. He let his poetry speak for him, and avoided any direct confrontation if possible. Hughes was not afraid to write material that contradicted societal norms about race, religion, or politics.

Langston lived a chaotic life in a chaotic time, and he seemed to take the brunt of the accusations that he is a communist with a grain of salt, which was his main ideal - to laugh instead of cry.

Chapter 22, Simple Speaks His Mind

Chapter 22, Simple Speaks His Mind Summary

Langston's character Jesse B. Simple was the longest running and perhaps greatest influence on the black community. This character was based on a man named Simple, whom Hughes had met in a Harlem bar. Simple represented the average African American trying to make it in a white society. The first Simple story appeared in the *Chicago Defender* in 1943. Simple appeared in five of Hughes' books. The character has been considered Hughes' finest contribution to American Literature.

Chapter 22, Simple Speaks His Mind Analysis

Although Hughes claimed to have named Jesse B. Simple after a man named Simple, whom he met in a bar, there is a possibility the character's name was derived from Aimie Semple Macpherson. Simple is Hughes' representation of the black man, and is Hughes' way of communicating that man's views to the world.

Chapter 23, I Used to Wonder

Chapter 23, I Used to Wonder Summary

Music was always a great influence on Hughes. Early in his career, many of Hughes' poems mimicked the rhythms of jazz; later he took on the beat of blues. People and the city were also important aspects of Langston's poetry, and Langston once said, "I like wild people much better than I do wild animals." He was a people's poet, who preferred to keep his feet and his heart on the streets.

His work has always included hearty portions of 'soul,' which Hughes learned to weave into whatever medium he was working with, whether it be poetry, prose, screenwriting, or playwriting. Hughes said when asked about soul, "(it is) a sort of synthesis of the essence of the Negro folk arts, particularly the old music and its flavor, expressed in contemporary ways but so clearly emotionally colored with the old." Hughes died of chronic heart and kidney conditions on May 22, 1967. Wake was read at his funeral:

Tell all my mourners

To mourn in red-

Cause there ain't no sense

In my bein' dead

As a final joke on the world, Hughes' last request was that a jazz band play, "Do Nothing Till You Hear from Me."

Chapter 23, I Used to Wonder Analysis

When reading Hughes' poetry, one should take into account the rhythms of jazz and blues. This is because Hughes based many of his rhymes on the rhythms of those forms of music, which were important aspects of his life. They were part of his soul, and, as such, emanated from deep within him and affected the words that he wrote. He was a blues poet and writer. This does not mean that his writing was depressing all the time, but that his writing could find the humor in even the most depressing things.

Characters

Langston Hughes

The subject of this biography, Hughes was one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. He was born into poverty, fatherless, and with little hope of becoming anything. However, Langston was a persistent individual and a hard worker who felt the urge to create. He used his experiences as a black man living in America, and his experiences as a black man traveling the world to enrich his soul and writing. Much of his writing was heavily influenced by Jazz and Blues music, and he is referred to as "The Blues Poet." Langston was an important, if not the most important, member of the Black Renaissance, which brought culture back to the black community. His writing often sought to uplift the black community through laughter and understanding, and he believed that laughter was the strongest weapon of all. Later in his career, Hughes was involved with anti-war campaigns and wrote about the rights of blacks. His writings, which include poems, plays, children's books, novels, and autobiographies are still widely read today.

James Hughes

Langston's father, James Hughes, is a hardheaded and selfish individual with strong views on the world. He abandons Langston and his mother when Langston was still a baby in order to pursue a better life for himself in Mexico, where he believes a black man has opportunity. He becomes successful in Mexico, but he only cares for money and power, and develops racist views about Mexicans and African Americans living in America. On two occasions, Langston visits his father's ranch in Toluca, Mexico and assists his father for the summer. James agrees to pay for Langston's college education at Columbia University after the second visit. Langston does not see his father again until his funeral, and he receives nothing in the will.

Carrie Hughes

Carrie is Langston's mother who, much like his father, rarely supports him. She is represented as an indecisive individual who is constantly breaking up with and getting back together with Langston's stepfather. Carrie also moves a number of times and lives in a number of locations, including Cleveland, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and New York City. This instability could account for Hughes' nomadic lifestyle.

Langston spends much of his money helping support his mother.

Mary Hughes

Mary is Langston's grandmother on his mother's side. She is a proud and strong woman who is involved in the black community. Mary introduces Langston to many important black leaders, including, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, both of whom have a great influence on Hughes' life. Mary dies when Langston is twelve.

W.E.B. DuBois

He was a well-known civil rights writer and the editor of *The Crisis*.

Dr. Alain Locke

He was a professor of philosophy at Howard University and compiler of the "New Negro" anthology.

Vachel Lindsay

Lindsay was a famous poet who recognizes Hughes' poetic ability.

Mary McLeod Bethune

Bethune was a founder of Bethune-Cookman College and a friend of Hughes.

Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason

Mason is Hughes' benefactor for *Not Without Laughter.* They have a falling out after the publication of the book.

Arthur Koestler

Koestler is a German reporter who travels with Langston through Asia.

Alfred A. Knopf

Langston's publisher is Alfred A. Knopf.

Objects/Places

Karamu House

A Community Center in Cleveland where Langston spends much of his time as a teenager, it is later turned into a theater, which Hughes helps to found.

Toluca, Mexico

The village where Langston's father lives is outside Mexico City.

"A Negro Speaks of Rivers"

This is the first of Hughes' poems to be published in an adult magazine.

"The Weary Blues"

One of Hughes' best-known poems is "The Weary Blues."

The Black Renaissance

Term equated with the renewal of black culture the Black Renaissance.

Fire

This was an unsuccessful publication created by several members of the Black Renaissance, including Hughes.

Not Without Laughter

This was Hughes' first novel; it was published in 1930.

Jesse B. Simple

A long running character that Hughes developed in order to demonstrate the plight of the African American man is Jesse B. Simple.

Mulatto

Hughes' longest running and most successful play is Mulatto.

Harlem Suitcase Theater

A theater that was founded by Langston Hughes, this is where he premiered his play *Don't You Want To Be Free?*

The Big Sea

Hughes' autobiography, it was published in 1940.

Setting

Richard Wright said that Langston Hughes lived by a rule of "ceaseless movement," a remark possibly inspired by Hughes's comment to Wright that "six months in one place is long enough to make one's life complicated." The title of the second volume of Hughes's autobiography, I Wonder as I Wander, serves as a motto for Hughes's nomadic life. In Langston Hughes, Meltzer describes Hughes's early life with his mother moving among relatives throughout the Midwest, his father fleeing to Mexico, and Hughes himself being sent to stay with other relatives when his mother cannot care for him. Hughes's constant traveling in his adult years can be seen as a search for home ground, a search made more burdensome by the difficulties encountered by any black American hoping to feel at home in the United States.

Some of the choices Hughes makes about where he lives are economically motivated, while others are influenced by artistic curiosity. Born in Missouri in 1902, Hughes spends his early years in Kansas City, Cleveland, and Chicago, living with his father in Mexico for a short time during Emilio Zapata's revolution, and then moving to New York to live in Harlem while he attends Columbia University for one year. Harlem becomes a kind of home base while he travels to Africa, France, and Italy on a freighter. After losing his papers in Genoa, he returns to the U.S. on a blackcrewed freighter and lives briefly in Washington, D.C., before entering Lincoln University, the "black Princeton," in Pennsylvania.

While at Lincoln, Hughes first visits the South—where segregation is required by law—for a poetry reading in Nashville, Tennessee, thus beginning his extensive career as a touring poet.

His subsequent travels take him to Haiti, Russia, the Orient, Mexico, Los Angeles, Spain, and Chicago.

Social Sensitivity

Like many other children of parents who immigrated to the U.S. to escape political oppression, Meltzer has a special appreciation for the guarantees of freedom inherent in the American social contract. Consequently, he is especially aware of the injustice of denying constitutionally mandated rights to any citizen. His biography of Langston Hughes resembles a historical record of the twentieth-century struggle against racial oppression in the United States, uniting Hughes's life as a poet with its inseparable complement—his life as a black American advocate for social justice and individual freedom. Meltzer discusses the racism that has cursed American society in a steady, reasonable tone, avoiding the hysteria of extremists on both sides of the issue while clearly demonstrating the costs of bigotry to all those involved.

Meltzer maintains that Hughes's poetry "voiced the condition of the black American. He listened closely and heard; he saw, and understood; he touched and felt." Drawing examples from Hughes's experiences, Meltzer shows that when a person is denied a job without regard for his individual qualifications, when he is attacked on the street for being from the wrong neighborhood, when he is refused service in a restaurant, when he has to pretend to be a Mexican in Texas to find a place to sleep, the words of the Declaration of Independence are mocked.

Beyond this, Meltzer reveals how the evils of racial bias are more subtle and widespread than readers might suspect; he portrays status being measured in the black community by shades of skin color, a black college where no black professors teach or black trustees serve, black people who are ashamed of poems about blacks, and middle-class black leaders who say, "We educate, not protest."

Literary Qualities

Following the classic pattern of biographical form, Meltzer proceeds in a generally chronological fashion, presenting Hughes's early years and initial education as a background for the formation of his character, then turning to the development of his craft, and eventually following Hughes's literary career through its rather uneven stages of accomplishment. By juxtaposing the text of some of Hughes's poems with descriptions of the personal experiences that inspired them, Meltzer demonstrates how an artist transforms life in art.

The thrust of the narrative provides a general sense of social progress and details Hughes's widening reputation as a writer, but both Hughes's life and work are marked by setbacks and reverses.

Nonetheless, as the narrative advances, an optimistic tone informs the action so that Hughes's life is offered as a successful and ultimately satisfying artistic struggle.

Meltzer renders a faithful account of the facts and spirit of Hughes's life. He begins the book with the chapter "Wandering" and ends with "I Used to Wonder," a literary framing technique that explicitly acknowledges Hughes's autobiographical work, I Wonder as I Wander. Divided into twenty-three succinct chapters, Meltzer's narrative comes alive with colorful images and sensory detail. Particularly memorable scenes include Hughes as a little boy sitting on the front porch in the summertime watching the stars come out and listening to his grandmother's stories; Hughes at his after-school job cleaning tobacco slime out of the brass spittoons at a local hotel; and Hughes as a young man trying to earn money for tuition by sorting dirty clothes at a wet-wash laundry in Washington, D.C. Both the introduction and the postscript lend additional authenticity to the biography, establishing Meltzer as Hughes's devoted and affectionate friend.

Themes

Division of White and Black

The division between white and black, also called the color line, was a palpable thing during Hughes' life. Because he lived mostly in the early part of the twentieth century, Hughes was susceptible to Jim Crow laws for most of his life. There are many instances in this biography where Hughes is denied equal rights because of the color of his skin. One instance occurs on the train ride home from Mexico. When the conductor finds out he is black, Langston is denied a sleeping car. Another instance of racism occurred when Langston was still a boy. He wanted to purchase food at a white cafeteria, but when he received his bill, it was fifty times the appropriate price. Because of this mentality, Hughes' life was often an uphill struggle; he often encountered locked doors where a white artist would have discovered open ones. Rather than develop an aggressive attitude toward whites, Hughes chose to act out passively with his writing. His method of blurring the color line was not to attack it directly, but to record the experiences of the black individual so that others would understand.

Mulatto

Perhaps an even more difficult segregation for Hughes to overcome was by people of his own heritage and skin color. Hughes was not entirely black; two great-grandfathers and a grandfather were white. As a result, Hughes was a light-skinned black man. Nonetheless, while in America Langston was considered an African American man and experienced the same Jim Crow segregation as other African American individuals. However, when he visited Africa, Africans, who said he was 'colored' not 'black', segregated Hughes.

Because Langston's heritage spanned the racial divide, he did not have the option of choosing a side. This theme recurs in much of Hughes' writing. "Cross," a poem about Langston's only friend in Africa, who was also a mulatto, ends with the lines "I wonder where I'm gonna die, being neither white nor black?" Hughes' play, *Mulatto*, also explored the problems people of mixed heritage encountered in a segregated era.

Unsettled Family Life

This theme is introduced very early in Hughes' life, when his father left the family for Mexico. From that point on, Langston's father plays a very small role in his life. Also at a young age, Langston is put in the care of his Grandmother Mary. She leads a settled life, but dies a few years after taking Langston under her wing. The Reeds, who are good caretakers, but are not family, then care for Langston. Carrie Hughes, Langston's mother, eventually returns to reclaim her of son and he joins his mother and his new stepfather in Cleveland. For the remainder of his life, his mother will perpetually separate and return to his stepfather, moving from city to city and state to state in the

process. Langston's sense of home is therefore not a solitary location, but wherever his mother happens to be at the time.

Hughes' unsettled family life translates two ways. Firstly, Hughes never has a father figure he can idolize. As a result, he turns to speakers such as Booker T. Washington and writers such as W.E.B. DuBois for male guidance. Second, Langston's nomadic lifestyle as a youth continues into his adulthood, when he explores the world, in the process becoming a cultured individual. Although his unsettled family life was unfortunate, it prepared Hughes for his future as an influential poet and writer.

Themes/Characters

Meltzer expresses his themes in the form of a three-fold journey, as he follows Hughes's life through the inner landscape of artistic and personal development, through the outer landscape of much of the northern hemisphere, and across the chronological landscape of the first seven decades of the twentieth century. The three paths of Hughes's journey constantly intertwine, his goals as an artist and as a man draw him across continents and oceans and to many of the major historic events in America's emergence as a world power. Underlying the entire process is the inescapable issue of racial identity. In the course of his journey Hughes meets or works with many of the outstanding black American writers of his era, and is introduced to many less prominent teachers or social exemplars whose determination and decency contribute to the gradual progress of black Americans toward the relative equality achieved in the last quarter of the century.

Because the narrative focuses exclusively on Hughes, the other characters in the story are seen only when they play an active role in his life or when Hughes writes about them. Consequently, none of the other characters appear in any depth, although Meltzer often gives a brief sketch of the most important people in Hughes's life. The people Hughes worked with emerge in a literary, political, or historical context, while Meltzer subjects the members of Hughes's family—his father, James Nathaniel Hughes; his mother, Carrie Mercer Langston; and his grandmother, Mary Langston—to a degree of psychological analysis. Meltzer shows how Hughes's father's self-hatred and obsession with money, his mother's love for literature, and his grandmother's iron strength affected the boy in his formative years. Although Hughes sees himself as a "passed-around boy," the writings of men such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, combined with the living example of dedicated black teachers such as Helen Chestnutt, give him a sense of his entire race as a kind of "family."

At the early age of eighteen, Hughes is already able to express this feeling eloquently with the poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." At age twenty-four he becomes actively involved in the literary movement known as the Harlem Renaissance and begins to meet such prominent contemporaries as Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, and Claude McKay. Although still shy about his work, he leaves a few poems at the hotel where the celebrity-poet Vachel Lindsay is staying while on a reading tour, and Lindsay's encouragement leads Hughes to imagine an audience beyond the black American community.

As his career develops, Hughes travels in a kind of international bohemian ambience, meeting the writer Arthur Koestler in the U.S.S.R. and sharing a flat with the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson in Mexico. Even at college, he is already in touch with people whose abilities in their youth indicate their potential for greatness, such as the musician Cab Galloway and the future Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall. Their courage in the face of adversity gives Hughes a strength that helps him to continue writing when his work is misunderstood or ignored by both black and white readers and critics.

Meltzer's depiction of Hughes registers the seemingly inevitable contradictions in the life of a complex man of exceptional artistic ability besieged by the continuing inequity of life for a black artist in the U.S. When Hughes leaves Columbia University after one year and heads for Africa on a freighter, Meltzer mentions that he throws all his books overboard, anxious to rid himself of the influence of a segregated society. (In fact, as Rampersad's biography points out, Hughes saved Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass.) He feels unsure about how he will support the war effort in 1941, but as Meltzer puts it, "If Hitler won, there would be no chance for the survivors to fight oppression anywhere."

In a typical accommodation to the possible, Hughes writes verses to help sell bonds and produces articles for the Writers War Board telling the country what black soldiers are doing to help win the war. Hughes has a clear picture of the economic oppression caused by discrimination and a strong sense of the effects of the Depression on people of all races, but he refuses to join the Communist party in the 1930s, wondering if the apparent improvements in the U.S.S.R. could have been made by less violent means.

Hughes's realistic view of what can be accomplished allows him to adjust reasonably well to many rebuffs, but those adjustments exact a high psychological toll at which Meltzer only hints.

Meltzer portrays a generally genial Hughes with a "great gift for friendship," but as poet Rita Dove comments, "His famous capacity for laughter was as much a shield as an invitation," and something of his suppressed bitterness might be detected in his description of himself as the first black "literary sharecropper." Meltzer tends to stress the more positive aspects of Hughes's life but offers enough moments of reflection, discouragement, and dejection to suggest the more somber demeanor that Rampersad reveals in his book.

Style

Point of View

Langston Hughes is written in the third person point of view. This is a natural point of view to choose for a biography because the term denotes writing about somebody else. Because it is not an autobiography, one would not expect the author to use the first person, I. Meltzer writes about Hughes from the standpoint of a fan and takes pride in Hughes' accomplishments. The biography is written in the past tense because everything that occurs in the book has already occurred in life. Since Hughes died in 1969, there is no reason to write in any other tense.

Setting

This biography is set during the years of Hughes' life, 1902-1969. Most of the story takes place in the United States, but there are portions of the biography that track Langston's activities in other countries, including Mexico, France, Spain, Russia, and China.

Hughes lived during a significant period, and he experienced two world wars, and a lifetime of segregation. Only at the end of his life would segregation be nearing an end in the United States. This had a great affect on Hughes' writing, much of which focused on unfair treatment of blacks and raising blacks from their segregated position in society. Hughes also wrote anti-war paraphernalia.

Language and Meaning

Milton Meltzer uses straightforward language in Hughes' biography. He writes short chapters, usually less than ten pages, which generally focus on a time or certain aspect of Hughes' life. The paragraphs are generally short and cover a lot of material. Because Hughes' life was so full, Meltzer condenses a great deal of information into his paragraphs and chapters. This constant movement from one place to another can be confusing and tiresome for the reader at times.

The chapter titles refer to periods in Hughes' life, and generally summarize the chapter with a phrase such as "Columbia vs. Harlem" or a reference to one of Hughes' works such as, "Dream Deferred." Using references to his work and life is a way to hold the book together, since it is about Hughes' life. Meltzer frequently quotes Hughes or uses excerpts from his work to express who Langston was as a person. This is a clever way to introduce Hughes' work without stepping outside of the biography.

Structure

This is a chronologically structured biography; however, Meltzer occasionally clumps the chapters together under a single idea, rather than a timeline. For instance, chapter twenty-two concerns Langston's character Simple, who was introduced in the 1940s, but is discussed one chapter before Hughes' death in 1969. Meltzer placed Simple out of the timeline because of the character's importance. Simple was Hughes' most important character, and he therefore receives attention near the conclusion of the book. Several other chapters, such as Chapter 18, which focuses on playwriting, step outside the timeline of Hughes' life, instead focusing on a single aspect of his career. This may at times cause an overlap of dates, which may be mildly confusing for the reader.

Quotes

"Some of my earliest attempts at verse-making were creating words in my own mind to the rhythms of the blues." Chapter 1, p. 20

"Homesick blues is

A terrible thing to have.

To keep from cryin'

I opens ma mouth an' laughs." Chapter 3, p. 39

"If we must die- let it not be like hogs,

Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot...

Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack

Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!" Chapter 6, p. 66

"My soul has grown deep like rivers." Chapter 6, p. 71

"I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,

Black like the depths of Africa." Chapter 7, p. 78

"Do not let the lionizers stampede you. Hide and write and study and think..." Chapter 10, p. 103

"It is the duty of the younger Negro artist...to change through the force of his art that old whispering 'I want to be white.'" Chapter 12, p. 122

"People need poetry." Chapter 14, p. 138

"That Justice is a blind goddess

Is a thing to which blacks are wise;

Her bandage hides two festering sores

That once perhaps were eyes." Chapter 15, p. 145

"Words should be used to make people believe and do." Chapter 20, p. 197

"There are many devils, but the most dangerous of all is the red devil. And now there comes among us a red devil in a black skin!" Chapter 21, p. 204

"Humor is a weapon, too, of no mean value against one's foes...The race problem in America is serious business, I admit. But must it always be written so seriously? So many weighty volumes, cheerless novels, sad tracts, and violent books have been written on race relations that I would like to see some writers of both races write about our problems with black tongue in white cheek, or vice versa. Sometimes I try. Simple helps me." Chapter 22, p. 212

"Tell my mourners

To mourn in red-

Caue there ain't no sense

In my bein' dead." Chapter 23, p. 220

Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Langston Hughes become a writer?

2. How do Hughes's travels influence his writing?

3. What is the Harlem Renaissance?

Who are some of the figures involved?

How is Hughes connected to this movement? How is Hughes connected to the American poetic renaissance associated with the work of e. e. cummings and Marianne Moore?

4. What are Hughes's goals as a writer?

Does he achieve them? Why or why not?

5. Which writers influence Hughes?

How can you detect their influence?

Essay Topics

Discuss the significance of the word 'mulatto' in relation to Langston Hughes' life and works.

Discuss whether you believe Hughes' was a political poet. Cite examples of his life and works to support your argument.

What is the Black Renaissance?

Hughes often incorporated other art forms into his poetry. Give an example of this and explain how the inclusion of other forms affected Langston's verse.

Langston Hughes often said that he came down with frequent cases of the 'Blues.' Explain what the blues are and what, if anything, Hughes felt was the remedy for this illness.

Why was Hughes considered a Blues poet?

What is the significance of the period in which Hughes lived in relation to his writing?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are the most significant characteristics of Langston Hughes's style as a poet?

2. Examine Hughes's political activities in terms of his ideas and concerns about social justice.

3. Discuss Hughes's artistic collaboration with other writers and musicians.

4. Analyze a particular poem to show how Hughes used language, image, rhythm, and sound.

5. How does Hughes represent black American culture?

6. Examine the critical responses of various reviewers to Langston Hughes's writing. Which critic's views do you agree with most? Least? Why?

7. Select a short story by Langston Hughes and show how Hughes uses plot, character, and mood to develop his themes.

Further Study

Dickson, Donald C. A Bio-Bibliography of Langston Hughes, 1902-1967. Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1967. A basic source for material about Hughes's life and work that was produced during his lifetime.

Emanuel, James A. Langston Hughes.

New York: Twayne, 1967. An intelligent and informative discussion of Hughes's life and work.

Hughes, Langston. The Langston Hughes Reader. New York: Braziller, 1958. Hughes's own selections of the work he wanted to preserve. Includes some commentary.

O'Daniel, Therman B. Langston Hughes: Black Genius. New York: William Morrow, 1971.A wide-ranging collection of essays, including studies of Hughes and Walt Whitman, of Hughes as a dramatist and literary experimenter, and of his use of Afro-American folk and cultural traditions.

Rampersad, Arnold. The Life of Langston Hughes. 2 vols. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, 1988. Described as a "superlative study" by the New York Times Book Review, the two volumes of Rampersad's biography are by far the fullest examination of Hughes's life and art to date. The first volume provides a valuable analysis of Hughes's psyche, accounting for the genesis of his art, while the second volume traces his career from 1941 until his death.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996