



The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens

“WILL YOU LET JIM CROW HOLD ME BACK?”

## THE POETRY AND PROSE OF LANGSTON HUGHES



Grade 11

United States History and Geography:  
Continuity and Change in the Twentieth Century

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### I. Introduction

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens recently acquired a collection of letters and literary manuscripts of the famed Harlem Renaissance author Langston Hughes. Many of the Hughes letters in the collection were written to his friend Loren Miller, an African American attorney. The collection also includes essays, a one-act play, and a previously unpublished poem. Acclaimed as the most gifted poet of the Harlem Renaissance and revered as one of America’s greatest twentieth-century poets, Hughes used his talents as a writer to probe the conscience of America; through literature he revealed the realities of being a black man in America in the first half of the twentieth century.

### II. Objectives

- ◆ To explain how Langston Hughes used poetry to comment on American political and social issues.
- ◆ To appraise the power of literature in promoting social change.

### III. History-Social Science Standards

#### Content Standards

- 11.5 (5) Describe the Harlem Renaissance and new trends in literature, music and art, with special attention to the work of writers (e.g., . . . Langston Hughes).
- 11.10 (1) Explain how demands of African Americans helped produce a stimulus for civil rights. . . .

### Analysis Skill Standards

- Students compare the present with the past, evaluating the consequences of past events and decisions and determining the lessons that were learned. (Chronological and Spatial Thinking)
- Students construct and test hypotheses; collect, evaluate, and employ information from multiple primary and secondary sources; and apply it in oral and written presentations. (Historical Research, Evidence, and Point of View)

## English-Language Arts Standards

### Content Standards, Grades 11–12

#### ***Reading Comprehension***

- 2.5 Analyze an author’s implicit and explicit philosophical assumptions and beliefs about a subject.

#### ***Literary Response and Analysis***

- 3.5c Evaluate the philosophical, political, religious, ethical, and social influences of the historical period that shaped the characters, plots, and settings.
- 3.8 Analyze the clarity and consistency of political assumptions in a selection of literary works or essays on a topic.

## IV. Background Information

The Great Migration of Southern Blacks to the urban centers of the North during and immediately following World War I helped to produce a flowering of African American art, music, and literature in what became known as the Harlem Renaissance. As a young man Langston Hughes, one of the foremost writers of the Harlem Renaissance, attended Columbia University studying engineering but abandoned his studies to pursue a love of poetry. He demonstrated a phenomenal mastery of the art, incorporating the rhythms and beat of jazz and the blues into stanzas as a commentary on the African American experience in a racially segregated society. In an article published in 1926, Hughes summed up the essence of the Harlem Renaissance, “We younger Negro artists now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they aren’t it doesn’t matter.” In addition to publishing nine volumes of his collected poems, Hughes wrote novels, short stories, plays, essays, and children’s stories. In his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Hughes wrote of the Harlem Renaissance, “. . . I was there. I had a swell time while it lasted. But I thought it couldn’t last long. . . . For how long could a large and enthusiastic number of people be crazy about Negroes forever?”

## V. Materials Needed

Class set copies of the following primary documents:

**Document A:** Langston Hughes, *A Short Biography*

**Poems:** Poems are available on “Langston Hughes Poems” on *The Academy of American Poets* website or in anthologies of American poetry

- “Let America be America Again”  
< <http://www.poets.org/poems/Poemprnt.cfm?prmid = 1473> >
- “I, too, sing America”  
< <http://www.poets.org/poems/Poemprnt.cfm?prmid = 1479> >
- “Will V-Day Be Me-Day Too?”  
< <http://www.poets.org/poems/Poemprnt.cfm?prmid = 2793> >

**Document B:** Hughes Letter to Loren Miller

**Document C:** Excerpts from *Mother and Child*

**Document D:** Excerpt from “The Need for Heroes”

## VI. Lesson Activities

1. Begin the lesson introducing the Harlem Renaissance from textbook readings in American history or American literature. Insure that students understand the effect of the “great migration” from the rural South to urban centers in the North in order to place the Harlem Renaissance in a historical context. Discuss with students the dreams and aspirations of African Americans who had migrated North during and immediately after World War I. Review the establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Marcus Garvey Negro Improvement Association. Explain how the two movements differed in their goals.
2. Assign **Document A**, “Langston Hughes, A Short Biography.” Discuss the reading, asking students how Hughes exemplified the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance.
3. Read to the class Langston Hughes’s poems “Let America be America Again,” “I, too, sing America,” and “Will V-Day Be Me-Day Too?” Or, refer students to the poems in anthologies of American poetry or on *The Academy of American Poets* website:  
< <http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?prmid = 84> > .  
After reading the poems, discuss the basic theme of each poem. Use questions such as the following as a means of stimulating class discussion.
  - Why does Hughes, in the poem “Let America be America Again,” repeat the line “America never was America to me?”

- How does Hughes reflect on the “American Dream?”
  - How does “I, too, sing America,” reflect the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance?
  - What is the tone of the poem?
  - What is the message that “G.I. Joe” conveys in the poem “Will V-Day Be Me-Day Too?”
  - How does the poem reflect the realities of segregation in America before and during World War II?
  - What is the central message common in all of these poems?
4. Have students read **Document B**, “Hughes’s Letters to Loren Miller.” The first of the two letters was written to thank Miller for his positive review of Hughes’s novel *Not Without Laughter*. The second was nothing more than a scribbled note on Southern Pacific stationery as Hughes traveled across the United States by rail. The note indicates that the author struck up a friendship with African American railway porters and waiters rather than “hobnobbed” with white passengers. Both letters provide an insight into Hughes’s views regarding the sentiments of most white Americans toward blacks in the early part of the twentieth century. Have students consider questions such as:
- Why is Hughes upset with critics taking his characters in *Not Without Laughter* as “representatives of the whole race or any one section of the race?”
  - Why do you think Hughes does not mingle with fellow passengers on the Sunset Limited?
  - What inferences can you draw from Hughes’ letter and scribbled note to Miller?
5. In the 1930s Hughes adapted one of his short stories in a one-act play, *Mother and Child*. The play is set in Ohio at a meeting of a women’s auxiliary, the Salvation Rock Missionary Society. Before the meeting begins, the ladies are gossiping about an incident that has aroused the white community. Hughes has his characters speak in dialect. The play illustrates the frail race relations in Ohio in the 1920s and 1930s. Have students read aloud **Document C**, a short excerpt from the first scene of *Mother and Child*.
- How does Hughes use the dialogue in this short excerpt to convey race relations in this Ohio town?
  - What is the reality that Lucy Doves brings to the conversation?

6. Divide the class into several groups and have each group read and discuss **Document D**, an excerpt from “The Need for Heroes” essay published in *The Crisis* in 1941.
  - What is the point Hughes is making in his essay?
  - What attitude is Hughes expressing when he refers to the college president’s expression of sympathy over the inability of whites in the community to attend Mrs. Roosevelt’s address at a black college?
  - According to Hughes, what does it take to become a hero?
7. Culminate the lesson by having students review the Fourteenth Amendment and the civil rights movement between 1954 (the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of the Supreme Court) and 1967 (Hughes’s death). Have students write an article, short story, or poem in Hughes’s style examining the disparities between the ideals and the realities of race relations in America during his lifetime.

#### Extension Activities

1. Read an excerpt from *Not Without Laughter* and describe one incident that illustrates de facto segregation in Kansas. How did Hughes have his characters in the novel react to segregation?
2. Write an essay on the contributions of Langston Hughes to American literature.
3. Have students select different Hughes poems and present a dramatic reading to the class followed by a discussion of the message the poem conveys.

## Langston Hughes, A Short Biography

James Langston Hughes, born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902, spent much of his childhood in Lawrence, Kansas. His family was proud of their heritage and lived a comfortable life unlike many other African Americans living in Kansas at the turn of the century. Langston Hughes's first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, was published in 1930. The setting for the novel is the fictional town of Stanton, Kansas, in the early part of the twentieth century. Stanton bears a resemblance to Lawrence, Kansas, where Hughes spent much of his youth. The novel is semi-autobiographical; although patterned on his experiences, Hughes recognized that his family was somewhat atypical. Hughes's grandmother, Mary Langston, and her first husband, Lewis Leary, were "conductors" on the Underground Railroad in Ohio. Leary joined John Brown at Harpers Ferry in 1859 and was one of the persons killed in the abortive raid. Hughes looked up to his grandmother's resistance to slavery and, as a youth, committed himself to opposing the oppressive Jim Crowism that had become part of everyday life in Kansas.

In his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Hughes explained that he wanted to write about a typical black family in the Mid-West and thus chose to write a novel incorporating his experiences rather than write an autobiography. He explained that his family was not ". . . a typical Negro family. My grandmother never took in washing or worked in service or went much to church. She . . . spoke perfect English, without a trace of dialect. . . . My mother was a newspaper woman and a stenographer. . . . My father lived in Mexico City. My granduncle had been a congressman. And there were heroic memories of John Brown's raid and the underground railroad in the family storehouse."

In the early 1900s public schools in Lawrence were not segregated after the third grade. There was a typical practice, however, for teachers to segregate African American students within the class. As a seventh-grader at Central School, Hughes and his fellow African American students were told to take seats in a row in the back of the classroom. Hughes complied but placed a placard reading "Jim Crow Row" on his desk. The principal ordered him to remove the sign or face expulsion. As a matter of principle, Hughes refused and was expelled. A prominent African American doctor in Lawrence intervened on young Langston's behalf and he was readmitted to Central School.

During high school, Hughes moved with his mother and attended public schools in Detroit, Topeka, and Cleveland. It was at this time that he became interested in poetry, writing his first poems while in high school. In his autobiography, he attributed his awakening to literature to the French writer Guy de Maupassant. "I think it was de Maupassant who made me really want to be a writer and write stories about Negroes, so true that people in faraway lands would read them—even after I was dead."

After graduating from high school, Hughes lived with his father in Mexico City for two years. In 1921, he entered Columbia University in New York—a choice predicated by a growing movement of African American culture centered in Harlem. He enrolled as an engineering major but within a year Harlem beamed him and he dropped out of the

university and took up residence in Harlem as a fledgling poet. In 1925 he entered Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and spent summers in Harlem at the height of the Harlem Renaissance. He wrote poems and articles for *The Crisis*, a magazine founded by W.E.B. DuBois in 1910 as a voice for civil rights. His first book of poems, *The Weary Blues*, published in 1926, won acclaim. His first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, was well received although some expressed criticism that his characters were stereotypical. In 1934 he published a collection of stories, *The Ways of White Folks*, and a play, *Mulatto*, that had a year-long run on Broadway, and a one-act play, *Mother and Child*, adapted from one of his short stories.

Hughes was attracted to socialism in the 1930s and, although he never joined the Communist Party, he frequently wrote articles for *New Masses*, an American communist publication. In 1932 a Soviet film company invited Hughes and 19 other African American writers, actors, singers, and students to participate in the production of a film on Negro life in America. The party spent several months in the U.S.S.R. advising the Moscow film corporation however, the movie was never produced. He became disillusioned with the Soviet Union when Stalin signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler whom Hughes despised.

In 1956, Hughes published the second volume of his autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*. Three years later he wrote a comic novel, *Tambourines to Glory*. The novel is set in Harlem and based on transplanted African Americans from the South attempting to cope with urban life. He also wrote a humorous serialized column based on Jesse B. Semple (Simple), a folk character he invented. The Semple stories were eventually collected and published in five volumes and are considered by some critics as his best work.

Hughes died in 1967 of cancer. During his entire career, he never relented from his commitment to equality. Langston Hughes, who was nicknamed the “Poet Laureate of Harlem” during his lifetime, is revered today as one of America’s greatest poets.



Langston Hughes (middle row, third from right) and friends aboard the *Europa* in 1932, traveling to Russia. Loren Miller is in the back row, far right.

## Hughes Letters to Loren Miller

Langston Hughes sent a copy of his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, to Loren Miller, a new acquaintance who was to become a life-long friend. Miller responded with a note praising his work to which Hughes wrote a reply thanking him for his review and expressing a concern that critics were type-classing his characters making them representative of all African Americans.

August 21, 1930

Dear Loren,

Thanks for your swell letter about the book. There are a lot of things wrong with it, but I learned a great deal writing it, so maybe the next one will be better. I hope so. The reviews have been good, though, and it's selling pretty well. Only one complete razz so far—and that came from Mr. Monroe Trotter's *Boston Guardian*. They seem never to have heard of poor Negroes up there—at least they certainly don't like them. . . . I remember when the colo[red-illegible] was giving me blues "down the country," you wrote a sympathetic line or so about them in the kappa Journal. I asked Eddie Silvera to convey my thanks to you one time when he went down to Washington, but I don't know whether he did or not. (I liked your articles in that paper—and wondered what had become of you until Louise said you'd turned up in California). Anyhow, that's why I wanted to send you the novel—I thought you'd at least understand it. . . . Regarding Lempy—sure, all the better class Negroes are not Lempy's—but you must admit there are some like her. (I didn't mean her to represent anybody but herself.) I wish I, or somebody, could write a novel in which each character wouldn't be taken as a "type-class" character; that there'd be some way of keeping them from being considered as representative of the whole race or any one section of the race. For Christ's sake, can't Negroes even in books, be just individuals—if they want to be?. . . . Glad to meet you, Loren.

Sincerely,  
Langston

Hughes scribbled a note to Loren Miller while traveling across country on the Southern Pacific's "Sunset Limited."

. . . I am having a good time on this train. Have met all the porters and waiters—and none of the passengers—so who says I don't mingle with the proletariat. If you say so—it's a lie—and moreover a Trotskyist position!

Yeah, man!  
Lang

Source: Hughes Box, Huntington Library, Arts Collections, and Botanical Gardens.

*Mother and Child*

Langston Hughes wrote a one-act play, c. 1934, based on one of his previously published stories. The play is set in Ohio; the plot centers on a meeting of the “Salvation Rock Missionary Society.” The women are gossiping about the birth of a child to a “loose white woman” fathered by a black man. Whites in the town are enraged and the women speak of rumors that they intend to run all black residents out of town. On the bottom of the cast list on the original copy of the typewritten play, Hughes wrote in ink, “This play may be produced without fee by any non-profit making organization. L.H.” The following are Hughes’s description of the play and a brief section of dialogue at the beginning of the drama.

The characters are typical Negro women to be found in any farm community on the edge of the South. They are not well dressed, nor very well educated.

Setting: The parlor of a small farm house in southern Ohio crowded with old-time furniture. Springtime. Bright sunlight through the lace curtains at the windows.

Monthly meeting of the Salvation Rock Missionary Society, a religious organization of rural colored ladies is being held. . . . They are gossiping as usual, but today the gossip centers persistently around a single tense and fearful topic—a certain new born child that has come to Boyd’s Center. . . .

Mrs. Sam Jones: (taking off her hat) Poor little brat! He ain’t been in the world a week yet, and done causes more trouble than all the rest of us in a life time. I was born here, and I ain’t never seen the white folks up in arms like they are today. But they don’t need to think they can walk over Sam and me. . . .

Sister Holt: Nor me!

Mrs. Sam Jones: (continuing) For we owns our land, it’s bought and paid for, and we sends our children to school. Thank God, this is Ohio. It ain’t Mississippi.

Cora Perkins: Thank God!

Lucy Doves: White folks is white folks, honey, South or North, North or South. I’s lived both places and I know. . . .

Source: Hughes Box HM 64072, *Mother and Child*

### “The Need for Heroes”

Langston Hughes published an essay entitled “The Need for Heroes” in *The Crisis*, June 1941. He sent a carbon copy of the essay with his typewritten correction in pencil to his friend Loren Miller. In the essay, Hughes writes of the need for recognizing heroes and finding heroism in the everyday actions of ordinary people.

“. . . Look around you for the living heroes who are your neighbors—but who may not look or talk like heroes when they are sitting quietly in a chair in front of you. Just to give you a clue (for you may search out your own heroes and heroines since you have them in your own cities and towns) look into the stories behind the lives of persons like Hank Johnson, the union leader in Chicago; like Angelo Herndon who stood trial for his life in Atlanta on a charge of sedition because he spoke against Jim Crow and hunger; like Mary McLeod Bethune who built a school in the far South on whose campus no Jim Crow is permitted, not even when Roland Hayes sings there or Mrs. Roosevelt speaks and the white folks wish to come—for they come and sit side by side with all others [author’s emphasis]. (And if you think that is easy to achieve in the South and does not take bravery and gall and guts, try it yourself. Or else be humble like that college president reported recently in the *COURIER*—of the male sex, too—who says he is sorry the white people of his community who wish to hear Mrs. Roosevelt speak on his campus cannot attend because the state law is against it! Thus meekly he accepts an obvious wrong and does nothing—not even verbally. Such men would accept Hitler without a struggle—but Mrs. Bethune wouldn’t—not even in Florida.) . . .

Source Hughes Box HM 64073, “Need for Heroes”

## Vocabulary

*de facto* segregation

segregation that is practiced without support of law; distinguished from *de jure* segregation that is established by state law and municipal codes; segregation policies of the North, West, and Midwest as opposed to segregation in the South that was upheld by state law

## Harpers Ferry

junction of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers; site of an arsenal captured during John Brown's raid in 1859

## Jim Crow

policy of discrimination against African Americans; segregation of African Americans; derived its name from an early minstrel song

## proletariat

the working class; originally the lowest class in Roman society

## Renaissance

to be born again; a rebirth or revival of art and literature

## Trotskyist

one who followed Leon Trotsky, a Russian revolutionary and Commissar of War, 1918–1924

## Selected Bibliography

### Print Resources

Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, Edited with an Introduction by Arnold Rampersad. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001.

A nine-volume set of Hughes's works.

Hughes, Langston, and Bernhard Nast. *The Best of Simple*.

A selection of Hughes's favorite stories chosen from three of his "Simple Books," *Simple Speaks His Mind*, *Simple Takes a Wife*, and *Simples Stakes a Claim*.

### Audio

Hughes, Langston. *Langston Hughes Reads*. Caedmon Audio, 2000.

An "Audiobook" that features Langston Hughes reading highlights from selected poems.

### Internet Resources

The Academy of American Poets. *Langston Hughes*. < <http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?prmID=84> >

A brief biography with links to several of Hughes poems. The website includes a list of Hughes published poems, prose, drama, and translations.

Schools of California Online Resources for Educators (SCORE). *Langston Hughes*. < <http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/langhu/langhutg.html> >

A collection of activities designed to supplement a unit of study on the Harlem Renaissance.