



Langston Hughes – Poet, Novelist, Activist

“An artist must be free to choose what he does, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose.”

Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902 in Joplin, Missouri. His parents divorced and his father moved to Mexico. He was raised by his grandmother and then moved to Lincoln, Illinois where he lived with his mother and her husband. Eventually they settled in Cleveland, Ohio.

Hughes began to write poetry. He graduated high school, spent a year in Mexico, and then was a student for a year at Columbia University in NYC. He left college to work as a seaman and travelled extensively (Mexico, Africa, Europe). He moved to Washington D.C. in 1924. In 1926, his first book of poetry *The Weary Blues* was published. He finished college at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Eventually he settled in New York City. He became a leading voice of The Harlem Renaissance movement. He also worked as a war correspondent in 1937. His works are known for his insightful portrayal of Black lives from the 1920's through the 1960's

Novels include: *The Ways of White Folks*, *The Big Sea* (his autobiography), lyrics for the Broadway musical *Street Scene*.

His first poem to receive critical acclaim was written when he was just 17 years old. Martin Luther King was said to be inspired by Hughes poems on dreams. Here is a simple yet powerful poem.

DREAMS
BY Langston Hughes

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

And this poem, is even more appropriate for today than it was when Langston Hughes wrote it. Here are some poignant sections of it.

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers
dreamed –
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants
scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

The poem goes on to portray the hardship of the Black people. Langston Hughes will always be remembered as an important voice of Americans who were oppressed.