



Langston Hughes: Volume 1, 1902-1941

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The life of Langston Hughes is a doubly fascinating one. On the one hand, Hughes achieved a success unprecedented by any earlier black writer. Primarily as a poet but also as a playwright, novelist, and humor columnist, Hughes became the first black American to support himself solely by his writing; and from the time of the Harlem “Renaissance” in the 1920’s to his death in 1967, his critical reputation was secure as one of the leading black literary artists of the twentieth century.

On the other hand, Hughes was acutely aware of the many struggles for social justice of his time, and he was both determined to play a role in these struggles and deeply ambivalent about his own success in the dominant white culture of the United States.

Hughes has already been the subject of a number of competent biographies, and Arnold Rampersad’s book holds no major surprises or new revelations about his subject. Yet Rampersad’s study has already been hailed as the definitive biography of Hughes, for it is outstanding both in the range and depth of its research, as well as in its careful balance of a sympathetic tone with scrupulous accuracy. Rampersad is not overeager to dig deeper into the psyche of his subject than previous biographers have; indeed, he makes the inexplicable mystery of Hughes’s personality the central theme of his book. In lieu of a psychological approach, he has made good use of all the documentary evidence left behind by Hughes to create an exhaustive--but always vivid--account of Hughes’s life and of its intersections with many other famous lives and social movements of his time.

Rampersad portrays Hughes as an intensely social yet essentially lonely man, with a restless urge to wander that can be traced back to his troubled childhood. The descendant of radical Abolitionists, Hughes was neglected both by his mother as she pursued a theatrical career and by his father who emigrated to Mexico. Encouraged by a number of supporters--black and white, literary and financial--Hughes rose to prominence in the 1920’s Harlem Renaissance with two volumes of poetry. His trips to Mexico to see his father in 1919 and 1920 had already established a nomadic pattern that he was to follow for the next two decades, as he traveled to Africa in 1923, Europe in 1924, the Soviet Union and the Far East in 1932, and Spain in 1937. Along the way, Hughes met such diverse artistic figures as W. E. B. DuBois, Paul Robeson, Countee Cullen, Robinson Jeffers, Vachel Lindsay, Arthur Koestler, and Ernest Hemingway.

Rampersad’s biography makes the most of the copious and dramatic details of the life of Langston Hughes, and it presents that life in revealing connection with the social forces of the United States and the world in the early twentieth century.

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