

# Langston hughes - a literary genius

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Langston Hughes (1902-1967), one of the most prominent figures in the world of Harlem, has come to be an African American poet as well as a legend of a variety of fields such as music, children's literature and journalism. Through his poetry, plays, short stories, novels, autobiographies, children's books, newspaper columns, Negro histories, edited anthologies, and other works, Hughes is considered a voice of the African-American people and a prime example of the magnificence of the Harlem Renaissance who promoted equality, condemned racism and injustice that the Negro society endured, and left behind a precious literary and enduring legacy for the future generations. In an endeavor to explore why and to what extent his poetry has still been read and used in modern days, I've found no African American writer has ever been an extreme inspiration to all audiences of every ethnic society as much as Langston Hughes was. More than 30 years after his death, the works of Hughes continue to appear, extensively used in the world of literature, education, filming and music, and is still relevant as an evidence of his nationwide and worldwide popularity in the present days. According to the article "Langston: This Year's 'Come Back' Kid" that quoting a comment from Maryemma Graham, co-director of the Langston Hughes National Poetry Project at the University of Kansas, Hughes reached that level of prominence because all his works appeal to audiences of all generations, races and nations, and interest in his work cuts across socioeconomic lines. With the same idea, Arnold Rampersad, Langston Hughes biographer and cognizant dean of humanities at Stanford University, wrote in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*: "These volume of the work of Langston Hughes are to be published with the same goal that

Hughes pursued throughout his lifetime: making his books available to the people. ". Also, he assesses that Hughes' key of success was his loyalty to simple writing style from which he showed no interest in poetry that most people could not read or understand " Modern poetry often appeals to a limited audience, deliberately, and contains complex vocabulary and arcane allusions... " Rampersad said. " He did not want to write like that; he had an aesthetic of simplicity." Personally, I agree with Rampersad since I've found no unnecessary words in Hughes' poems. With his elegant and simple phrases, Hughes brought out complex questions about racism and inequality in the U. S. society. Besides, delivering his poetry from his heart, Hughes made many black readers feel as though everyday practices of their lives was portrayed in his writing, as writer Ishmael Reed once said, " We should honor Langston Hughes for his ability to say what was in souls of millions" . In a 1996 essay on Langston Hughes' Collected Poems in the New Republic, Helen Vendler, one of America's top poetry critics, echoed Rampersad's point when she said that most of his poems are accessible to anyone who can read, and even the more allusive ones generally mention events that were, at the time, in the daily newspapers . In addition, when mentioning of Hughes' masterpiece " The Negro Speak of Rivers", Kevin Powell, writer, founding staff member and former senior writer for Vibe magazine who helped introduce the hip-hop generation to Hughes' work, noted, " Any group can relate to that piece. If you're an immigrant coming from Ireland or Italy, or a Jew who has escaped Nazi Germany, or if you're a woman, you can relate to that piece \_ or if you're gay or lesbian, or obviously if you're African-American". However, behind their apparent simplicity, the glory of Langston

Hughes' poems was to use many symbols to illustrate his main themes and still maintain the elements of profundity, humor and irony in the meanings such as those in " Ku Klux", " The Negro Speak of Rivers", " What Happened to a Dream Deferred ? ", " I, too, Sing America", " Memo To Non-White People"... Langston Hughes' talents and popularity were greatly remarked by his influence on many African-Americans who work in a varied fields, including some who don't even realize it. In the article " A legend of many cultures: Writers, musicians and actors can sight influence of Langston Hughes", John Mark Eberhart makes it clear that Hughes' influence spread beyond writers to many actors and musicians. For instant, Novelist Alice Walker, who would go on to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1983 for " The Color Purple," and Paule Marshall are both thankful to Hughes' wisdom and approach to literature that had shined their writing career and helped give them courage to write honestly . In addition, in the interview by Kalamu Ya Slaam, Woodie King, often called a " renaissance man" who has excelled as a producer, a director for stage and film, a writer and editor, a teacher and mentor, and a founder and artistic director of theatrical institutions, credits his literary bias toward short stories to the influence of playwright Langston Hughes, and recalls his fateful meeting with Hughes that changed his life by leading him to writing career and impelled him to become an actor. Moreover, learning Hughes' poems from his mother, Actor Andre Lee Ellis, founder and managing director of Andre Lee Ellis and Company, acknowledges of using them in his show " Telling It Like It 'Tis" (Higgins). In " Dream lives on — Word of poet Hughes still resonate", Rampersad concludes that it's hard to think of a modern African-American writer who was not

influenced by Hughes. By comparing Langston Hughes' popularity against another African American poet of the Harlem Renaissance - Countee Cullen, we can clearly confirm his steady position in the world of literature.

According to my random search within the Infotrac database, there are more than two hundred articles writing about Hughes' life as well as his writing style, popularity and influence, including those from many top national critics and journalists, while the number of articles that relates to Countee Cullen is fifteen. Another investigation I made is to search for the quantity of books published by or about Langston Hughes in Amazon's website. With 318 book titles, Hughes is still an overwhelming winner against Cullen who has only 23. Moreover, using Google to search for any informations related to Hughes gave me an extremely disproportionate result with 290, 000 websites containing Hughes' informations, news, biography, books, poems and films, compared to 21, 600 for Cullen. When searching within the High Beam Library, the result of comparison between these two famous poets has still not been changed with Hughes be the winner. When making a comparison between Hughes and Richard Wright, another African American author, Rampersad said : " I don't want to say Hughes is an optimistic writer, but I think he touches a lot of people in a way that, for example, Richard Wright doesn't...Wright's message... was so harsh in some respects, and cold, and misogynist. ... You may respect his writing but you don't particularly enjoy it as you do with Hughes". In addition, in the keynote address " The Life and Times of Langston Hughes", Rampersad emphasizes Hughes' reputation in the national culture by pointing out a certain fact that when the Academy of American Poets conducted a public vote that attracted more than ten

thousand people responded to find out which American poet among 205 nominators deserves to be placed on a postage stamp, Hughes far outdistanced the runner-up, Sylvia Plath, to achieve the honor. Furthermore, among the websites of more than 400 poets featured on the academy, Hughes' was most frequently visited according to this organization's statistic (Rampersad). In the article "' Poet lives in Kerry campaign", Terry Rombeck wrote that when Democratic Presidential candidate John Kerry used Langston Hughes' poem, " Let America Be America Again" as his campaign slogan, some critics believe that Kerry's mentions of Hughes would help draw attention to the poet from people who want to study him more, and was also a good way of Kerry to articulate that something is wrong with the country but in a forward-looking, optimistic way and as his promise to American voters of making America to return to a state of being that country which it was and shall be again. However, many others express their worry that Hughes would not have wanted his work used in a political campaign since the main issue in the poem is racial inequality. In a statement made in 1964 - " Politics can be the graveyard of the poet. And only poetry can be his resurrection" - that is used to preface the second volume of The Collected Works of Langston Hughes , Hughes made the point that poetic inspiration might be affected by politics, but poetry can help to resuscitate politics. As a poet and a socialist, Hughes lifetime dream was to set himself up as a defender of freedom and justice for Negro people. Therefore, whether or not it is Hughes' wish, Kerry's use of poetry in his campaign rhetoric is an evidence of the power of poetry that Hughes has delivered, and we'd therefore have good reason to be optimistic of Hughes' popularity in the

present days. Being not only a literary idol to numerous elder and middle-aged readers, Langston Hughes' works have been attracting a certain quantity of fans from the young generation when many students attended in the Langston Hughes symposium at Kansas University to celebrate his 100th birthday. Rampersad lamented that young people today are not being taught to value poetry, but when they are exposed to Hughes, " they always take to him . . . because his poetry is lyrical, so positive and uplifting... " Jen Huang, a friend in my Chemistry 1B class who previously took this course, said that she and many friends of hers have long been fans of Hughes' work since high school. " His poems are sometimes heartbreaking, and sometimes uplifting. In my opinion, he is one of the most amazing poets in the last century, " Jen added. In addition, she says that in this century, the music industry has been dominated by young people's most favorite kind of music — hip hop, and many people view Langston Hughes as the forefather of this musical stream. Similarly, Journalist and filmmaker Darralynn Hutson, in the recent interview " One on One with Filmmakers" by Dan Perkins, makes it known that hearing so many rappers use Langston's words and not give him credit was the motive for her to co-wrote and produced the film Langston Hughes' Dream Harlem. " I know there are some things out there in public domain, but it was important to me that the hip-hop community realize who their forefather is" Hutson added. Devoting most of his life and poetic genius to the national culture, the 100th anniversary of Langston Hughes's birth was celebrated on Feb. 07, 2002 by more than 600 scholars, students and enthusiasts who gathered at the University of Kansas, including actor Danny Glover, Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, former poet laureate Robert Pinsky, writer

Anorld Rampersad, Amiri Baraka, and Ismael Reed — one of more than 75 presenters who came from as far away as Europe, Africa and Asia. In this symposium, in speeches, films, concerts, art shows and poetry readings, they reviewed his history, literary background and legacy, and offered their memories and respect to “ this literacy giant and Kansas native son” (Watkins). Glover, who has been a loyal fan of Hughes since childhood, said that Hughes was well regarded on his 100th anniversary of his birth because delivered such a powerful message about the joys and sorrows of black life. According to Watkins, a half day teacher’s workshop, like the rest of the symposium, attracted a wide range of participants working in education, including more than 150 professors and teachers from many elementary schools, community college and universities as well as Headstart program teachers and AARP program facilitators. From this certain fact, we could affirm Hughes’ contribution and influence to the nation’s educational system. “ Through his works and his own life experiences, Hughes hoped to change the way people treated each other, ” said Sabra Dupree, my former English teacher who was previously teaching Hughes’ poetry at San Jose City College. In addition, she makes a point that today’s teachers are using the factors of beauty and humanism in Hughes’ poetry to addresses racial issues to the young generation, and “ although it has been 30 years since Hughes left this world, his brilliant talent would have been reminded of as an eternal flame shining through the world of literature” (Dupree).