Langston Hughes

Langston Hughes was born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri. His parents separated shortly after his birth. Early in his life, Hughes’ mother fostered within him a love of the written and spoken word by introducing him to books and taking him to see plays.

When he was six his mother tried to enroll him in the Harrison Street School near their home in Topeka. She was told that all African American children attended Washington School, considerably farther away. Langston’s mother argued for his enrollment at Harrison, and he was eventually admitted.

When Hughes’ mother moved to Kansas City for work, she left him in the care of his elderly maternal grandmother in Lawrence. She wrapped young Langston in a shawl that had belonged to her first husband, Lewis Sheridan Leary, who had been killed helping John Brown in the raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry.

Although he lived in several places throughout the Midwest during his youth, Hughes always considered Kansas home. He once told a Lawrence audience, “I sort of claim to be a Kansan because my whole childhood was spent here in Lawrence and Topeka, and sometimes in Kansas City.”

Hughes’ first published work, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” appeared in the NAACP magazine, The Crisis, in 1921. It became his signature poem. Hughes attended Columbia University until he left in 1922 due to racial prejudice within the institution.

Hughes wrote poetry that reflected the Harlem neighborhood that surrounded him. Although he was considered part of the Harlem Renaissance, he found himself at odds with those who gave birth to it. Hughes believed they sometimes compromised the cultural identity of African Americans in order to achieve social equality. Perhaps because of his own upbringing, Hughes had a strong connection to those in the lower social-economic strata and he dedicated his life to not only writing about their struggles, but to advocating for equality and justice. He was called the “O. Henry of Harlem,” and the “Negro Poet Laureate.”

Hughes’ works – poetry, plays, short stories, novels, autobiographies, children’s books, and newspaper columns – enjoyed worldwide popularity and were translated into 12 languages. M. Bekker wrote in the introduction to a Russian edition of Hughes’s work: “The poetry of Langston Hughes is simple and beautiful, like life itself. On whatever subject the poet writes – love and tenderness, degradation and violence, joblessness and the Lynch law, anger and the struggle for freedom – his poems are always imbued with the people’s sorrows and joys. For this reason his poems go unfailingly to the heart of the common man, be he black or white, American or Russian.”