



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1991 Volume III: Afro-American Autobiography

Langston Hughes: Voice Among Voices

Guide for Curriculum Unit 91.03.01
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Langston Hughes has been accepted by people all over the world as one of the most eloquent spokesmen for the American Negro. He has written several volumes of poetry, six novels, nine books for young people, two autobiographies, many short stories and sketches, plays, photo essays, translations, lyrics for musicals and operas, radio and television scripts, recordings, and numerous articles on a variety of topics. He often wrote on controversial, racial themes, portraying his people with realism. He created a Negro literature which became part of the Harlem Renaissance Movement. Because of the general interest in all facets of Negro life in the 1920s and 30s, he was able to please large elements of both the white and Negro audience.

At the time I made my decision to read Langston Hughes, I never realized the monumental literary portfolio that this gentleman produced. His literary accomplishments are well represented through his poetry, his fiction, and his drama. His short stories were written utilizing a character named Jesse B. Simple, a universal, charming character within whom we all can see a little bit of ourselves, usually in a humorous and honest capacity. His poetry often conveyed serious messages. Although his story was seldom pleasant, he told it with understanding and with hope. His novels, especially "Not Without Laughter," created a warm human picture of Negro life in Black America. The family was very important to Langston Hughes, but so were the forces that surrounded the family—the racial discrimination, the violence of society, the unfairness of educational opportunities, and the right to share in the American dream of opportunity and freedom. It's to these high ideals of opportunity and freedom that my research and efforts have been devoted this year in my curriculum unit.

This curriculum unit focuses on a varied sampling of Langston Hughes' poetry, his short stories starring his "ace-boy" Jesse B. Simple, and vignettes from "The Big Sea," his first autobiography. Within these selections, many universal themes will be explored, especially as they relate directly to students. Growing up and living in America, racial violence and prejudice, impassions on social progress, and hope for a brighter future while "climbing a crystal staircase" will be some of the concerns which are covered.

Within the poetry section, I have chosen fourteen selections, some of which are "The Negro Mother," "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," and "Proem." Each of these poems traces Negro history through time and civilizations. Other pieces such as "Mulatto" and "Cross" approach the issues of miscegenation and the offspring of these relationships. "Merry-Go-Round" addresses Jim Crow laws, asking the question of which horse is meant for the black child. "The South" speaks of love and hate, "Share-Croppers" of the futility of daily work in the fields, and "One-Way Ticket" of the desire to go anywhere—anywhere but the South. Other

poems will be discussed as well.

As for the short stories, I have chosen five selections such as “Who Is Simple?,” “Last Whipping,” “Banquet in Honor,” “Puerto Ricans,” and “Fancy Free.” Most of these choices are rich in humor and classic situations, often carrying a most powerful, subtle underlying message.

“The Big Sea” was the first of Langston’s two autobiographies. His story begins in New York as he sets sail on a steamer headed for Africa in search of his Negro motherland. His journey takes him to the Canary Islands, the Azores, Dakar, Holland, Paris, Italy, Spain, and finally back to America. While in Europe, he works as a cook, a doorman, and a waiter. In Genoa, he exists as a beach bum and on his excursions he has as many adventures as a fruit cake is full of raisins and nuts. It’s these adventures that will be discussed in vignettes as the story progresses.

(Recommended for Reading: Comparative Literature, grades 7-12)

Key Words

Afro-Americans Hughes Langston Biography Autobiography Poetry Short Stories Literature

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