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The literary career of Langston Hughes

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THE LITERARY CAREER OF LANGSTON HUGHES

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
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PREFACE

Langston Hughes has been called the most prolific and the most representative writer of the new Negro generation. This nomination has not been without basis, for he has achieved fame as poet, fictionist, essayist, dramatist, and lecturer. His original poetic designs have been a valuable contribution to literature, and both Negro and American authorship have profited by his faithful portrayal of Negro life and character as well as by his simple and direct style. A study of the literary career of a man who has contributed much to Negro and American literature, and who has influenced the literary style and trends of younger artists should, therefore, be an important contribution to scholarship.

In this study of the literary career of Langston Hughes the investigator has been primarily concerned with a chronological treatment of the different phases of his work and secondarily with revealing the transition in Mr. Hughes' career from a writer principally interested in racial materials to one mainly concerned with propagandizing for the proletariat.

After briefly surveying the new Negro movement in Chapter I, the writer undertakes in Chapter II a discussion of Mr. Hughes' life and publications to 1932, pointing out the primitivistic and racialistic elements in his writings which link him so definitely with this movement. In Chapter III, after giving a short review of the depression decade, the investigator examines Mr. Hughes' works and activities as a proletarian propagandist during the 1930's. The conclusion summarizes the study as a whole, calling attention to his significant contributions and considering his possible future activities as a writer. Much of the important data included in Chapter III were obtained through correspondence with Mr. Hughes which is included in the appendix.
A definitive and exhaustive study of Mr. Hughes' literary career has been impossible in this thesis because of several handicaps encountered by the writer. In the first place, there has been no detailed record of the subject's life and activities since 1930, and the author has thus relied largely upon miscellaneous data supplemented by valuable notes sent to her by Mr. Hughes. Furthermore, a thorough treatment of some of his work during the depression decade has been rendered impossible because of the unavailability of manuscripts which have not been published and are not procurable through inter-library loan. Incidentally, most of these manuscripts were recently contributed by Mr. Hughes to the James Weldon Johnson Collection of the Yale University Library, where, at the time of this investigation they were being catalogued and arranged for use by scholars.

The writer is greatly indebted to The Big Sea, Mr. Hughes' autobiography, for pertinent facts and materials otherwise unobtainable; to Mr. Hughes for promptness in answering letters of inquiry; to Mr. Wallace Van Jackson and Mrs. Gaynelle Barksdale, librarian and reference librarian, respectively, of Atlanta University, for courtesies extended during the preparation of this paper; and to Dr. Hugh M. Gloster, of the Department of English of Morehouse College and Atlanta University, who has given the writer useful advice and criticism in the selection and development of this subject.
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CHAPTER I

THE LITERARY BACKGROUND

Langston Hughes is preeminently a product of his times. The stirring developments of the World War era, the Roaring Twenties, and the depression period left an indelible impression upon the life and works of the young poet. Consequently, before undertaking a discussion of the literary career of Hughes, this writer feels that it is necessary to discuss briefly the flowering of racial literature during the 1920's centered in Harlem and popularly known as the Negro Renaissance.

There appears to be some question among critics as to whether the Negro Renaissance has been an intellectual rebirth within the race itself as revealed in its literature, or whether it has been a growing attitude of acceptance on the part of American Nordics. It is believed by some that to say that the Negro Renaissance of the 1920's was a re-awakening of interest on the part of a white audience rather than of production on the part of Negro artists would be no exaggeration. Others, however, assert that one has only to point out the quality of the literature published in the twenties as compared with that of the productions of the previous ten years and the obvious differences will speak for themselves. Controversial strain might be lessened if the advent of this intellectual emancipation of the black man were attributed to both reasons, for each has played a significant role. Whether there has been a renaissance of the Negro writer or a renaissance of the white American audience is of minor importance. The fact remains that

1 Lloyd Morris, "The Negro Renaissance," The Southern Workman, LIX (February, 1950), 82.

there was a renaissance, a cultural rebirth for the Negro artist which exerted considerable influence upon American life and literature.

Negro literature prior to the year 1919 was important in one sense, yet unimportant in another: important because, despite over two hundred years of servitude and the multiple handicaps of a lately emancipated people, the Negro author was progressive enough to delve into the field of literature; and unimportant, perhaps, because as literature it was fundamentally inferior.

The few Negro authors of the decades immediately following the Civil War limited their work primarily to either of two types, the biography and the essay, and wrote a literature reminiscing the struggles of slavery and largely influenced by the political temper of the times. But the new day of freedom experienced by this post-Civil War generation soon merged into a night of utter darkness and devastation, of hardship and suffering, of toil and struggle for mere existence, a night long to be remembered for the deep, ugly scar it placed upon the mind and spirit of America's black race.

The close of this new day of freedom is anticipated in the beginning of modern industrial developments in the South. With the coming of this era, the American Negro began another long and difficult struggle for freedom and democracy; and, while the race was concerning itself with the severing of those bonds that bound them to that status of existence that as slaves they had been reduced to, world literature was experiencing a similar breaking. The eighteen-nineties witnessed the unleashing of "all the creative forces of the century for a glorious day of experiment; there was abroad a new

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1Benjamin Brawley, The Negro Genius (New York, 1937), pp.100-121.
curiosity, a new spirit of daring, a tendency towards healthy controversy.*

In America there was something of the same temper. It was an age which turned to realism and naturalism, and advocated the presentation of the whole truth, naked, unadorned.

Prior to this time there had not been much significant Negro poetry. In 1773, a young slave girl, owned by a wealthy Boston family, wrote and published a small volume of poems that made her the object of great curiosity and attention. This young poetess was Phillis Wheatley, who modeled her works after the style and form of Alexander Pope, the outstanding English poet of the early eighteenth century. The few Negro poets between Phillis Wheatley and Paul Laurence Dunbar exercised a mastery of technique in the use of poetic materials and forms that was clearly mediocre. But in spite of their numerous limitations, these poets—including George M. Horton, Frances E. Harper, James M. Bell, and Alberry A. Whitman—wrote verse often characterized by merit and deserving of recognition.

As has been previously stated, the South had embarked upon a new era in industry, and the reaction from Reconstruction was complete. Benjamin Brawley says:

Disfranchisement had set in, peonage abounded, and lynching was at its height. Moral issues were no longer uppermost, and the Negro had to find in the new scheme such a place as he could. It was Booker T. Washington—statesman, orator, and leader of men—who perceived the grave problems arising from this condition and who endeavored to

1 Ibid., p. 143.
3 Benjamin Brawley, op. cit., p. 145.
bring about an adjustment that would benefit both races; but the first
writer to attain high recognition was Charles W. Chesnutt, the novelist
whose work, Brawley says, at its best has not been surpassed.¹ Along with
Dunbar and Chesnutt, comes W. E. B. DuBois, the eminent sociologist, author,
and scholar, who for long years fought the solution advocated by Washington,
who felt that the problem could be solved through the establishment of schools
and institutions solely for the purpose of training efficient workers in
skilled trades and common labors through which the Negro could expect to gain
wealth whereby "eventually through the ownership of capital he would be able
to achieve a recognized place in American culture."² On the other hand,
DuBois firmly believed, and still does, "in the higher education of a
Talented Tenth who through their knowledge of modern culture could guide the
American Negro into a higher civilization."³

While these two Negro leaders were engaged in this heated but well-
meaning controversy, the other races of the world were experiencing a
similar unrest. For years the growing contention between European countries
was mounting higher and higher until it burst forth into a tremendous con-
flict that later brought North America in its immediate wake. In 1917,
therefore, the United States declared war upon Germany and her confederates.
The outbreak of war was, perhaps, the best possible stimulus to the
approaching rebirth of the American Negro, for, as was expected of him, he
participated wholeheartedly in the nation's fight for democracy. As a
result, there was brought about a change, socially, politically, and

¹Ibid.
³Ibid.
economically. For the first time Negro youths left the Southern farms and plantations either to participate in active combat or to aid in checking the ever-growing shortage of labor in Northern factories. Multitudes of ignorant Negroes, completely oblivious of the many pitfalls awaiting unsuspecting migrants in big cities, packed their meager belongings and set out to seek new adventures and new modes of living, and to share in the material expansion brought on by the war. Also, for the first time, Southern plantation owners were made to realize that their former slaves were actually free to go as they pleased and partake of opportunities the newly arisen situation afforded.

But it was neither the migratory movement nor the World War itself that exerted the greatest influence upon the coming Negro Renaissance; instead, it was the close of the war—in fact, the year 1919—that witnessed such a momentous change. It was for the American Negro a period of extraordinary and unexpected reaction, a reverberation that had two main causes, according to DuBois: first, the competition of emigrating Negro workers, pouring into Northern industry out of the South and leaving the Southern plantations with a shortage of customary cheap labor; and second, the resentment American Negro soldiers felt because of the treatment they received in this country, particularly in the South, after the Armistice. From these emigrating, resenting individuals emerged the representative type that Rollin Harte later designated as the "New Negro."

Prior to this time the characteristic attitude of the Negro, as exemplified in his literature and general behavior, was one of complacency, self-consciousness, and social inferiority. Although the work of the

\[1\text{Ibid., p. 263.}\]
intellectuals was slowly moving into a sphere governed by a sense of aesthetic value, it yet carried those traits that definitely ranked it as purpose literature; for Charles W. Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, W. E. B. DuBois, and James Weldon Johnson had accepted to some extent part of the inherited traditions of Negro literature, either the stereotyped Negro characters and situations, or the dramatic, ostentatious protest against injustice to the race. Although the writers were propagandistic, the race is indebted to them for erasing the doubt that it was capable of artistic production. But the generation described by Fred Pattee as one "that had furnished the shock troops for the war" marched back into civil life disillusioned and embittered. The realistic aspects of the conflict—its disease, destruction, heartbreak, and exposure to hardship—crushed the spirits of the best, white and black. Having shared in the fight for the democratic ideal, the Negro felt he was due a share in the results. In an article appearing in Century for March, 1926, Carl Van Doren wrote:

Those white Americans who for sixty years have been insisting that the black American must keep in his place have generally been the sort who in another breath could insist that America is the home of opportunity for all men. If now they are disturbed at seeing that the Negro's place is no longer what it was, perhaps they can be consoled by thinking that the opportunity was even greater than they realized. It was, after all, too much to expect that the colored tenth of the population, whatever its racial handicap, would not be touched by the gospel of progress which the other nine-tenths swore by.

At this time "the mind of the Negro," asserts Alain Locke, "seems to

1 Augusta Jackson, op. cit., p. 201.
2 Ibid.
have slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation and to be
shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority. The new
Negro that came forth at the close of the nineteen twenties entered with a
newly acquired attitude towards himself. His new self-respect and self-
dependence blazed the path to a dynamic phase of existence. In other words,
as Locke says, "the migrant masses, shifting from countryside to city,
hurdle several generations of experience at a leap, but more important, the
same thing happens spiritually in the life-attitude and self-expression of
the young Negro, in his poetry, his art, his education and his new outlook
with the additional advantage, of course, of the poise and greater certainty
of knowing what it is all about."

Thus arose a new literary generation bent upon showing that in the life
of the country the Negro was a constructive force, that anything which did
not present him in a favorable light made him impatient, and that those
opportunities which would serve to vindicate his manhood, he would immediate-
ly and forcefully seize. In its influence the Negro Renaissance had good
and bad effects: good, because it was an incentive to high and accomplished
endeavor, and bad, perhaps, because it meant that America's black man would
often be on dress parade.

Before the actual entrance of any new phase of literature, however,
there appear those precursors who show in one way or another the new
tendencies. The forerunners of the new school of Negro literature were

1 Alain Locke, "Enter the New Negro," Survey Graphic, LIll (March, 1925), 631.
2 Ibid.
3 Benjamin Brawley, "The Promise of Negro Literature," Journal of Negro
History, XIX (January, 1924), 54.
4 Ibid.
headed by James Weldon Johnson, and included Fenton Johnson, Leslie Pinckney Hill, Walter E. Hawkins, Lucien Watkins, Charles Bertram Johnson, Joseph Cotter, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Roscoe Jamison, and Anne Spencer. It is of interest to note how James Weldon Johnson with the advent of the war period and its two great influences on the Negro—physically, the migratory factor from the South to the North, and spiritually, the awakening of the black race to a realization of its rightful share in the benefits of democracy—experienced a transitory period in his own literary career. In 1910, for example, Johnson had been content to pray sincerely but with humility:

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way
Thou who hast by thy might, led us into the light
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God,
where we met Thee;
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world,
we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath thy hand,
May we forever stand,
True to our God,
True to our native land.

In 1917, however, he assumed a militant attitude in "Fifty Years", and defiantly cried:

This land is ours by right of birth,
This land is ours by right of toil;
We helped to turn its virgin earth;
Our sweat is in its fruitful soil.

Then should we speak but servile words,
Or shall we hang our heads in vain?
Stand back of new-come foreign hordes,
And fear our heritage to claim?

No! Stand erect and without fear,
And for our foes let this suffice—
We've bought a rightful sonship here,
And we have more than paid the price.
The others also showed signs of strong racial concern. Not all attained individual prominence as writers, yet each has some significance, and collectively they appear quite important. Fenton Johnson uses the free verse medium which often carries undertones of fatalism; a strong racial note is observable in Walter E. Hawkins' "A Festival on Christendom"; while Lucien B. Watkins, Roscoe Jamison, and Joseph Cotter, three minor figures, convey the new theme in their works.

These paved the way for the Negro Renaissance; and the most spirited of the new poets appearing on the scene was Claude McKay, fiery, sensitive, and a true exponent of the temper characterizing the younger Negro generation. Born in Jamaica in 1889, he came to the United States at the age of twenty-three. For several years he worked first as a railroad porter, and then as a hotel waiter. Neither of these occupations allowed the young writer any time to record the poetic feelings in his heart. Later, however, he worked in an editorial capacity for The Masses which became The Liberator, both publications advancing socialistic ideology. McKay, Redding remarks, must have been influenced by the opinions advanced in these journals, although his irregular compositions gave no indication of this influence on his individual social views. Heretofore his work had been predominantly aesthetic, expressive of the surroundings McKay had been exposed to in his early youth in the West Indies. His Spring in New Hampshire and Other Poems, appearing in 1920, though not demonstrative of the later revolutionary leanings of the poet, distinctly reveal his gifts—"his love of color, his

1 Benjamin Brawley, The Negro Genius, p. 236.

2 Ibid.

lush imagery, his sensitive massing." The publication in 1922 of his best-known collection, *Harlem Shadows*, however, enables us to observe for the first time evidence of the new Negro spirit. The transition is especially shown in such pieces as "Harlem Shadows," "The Harlem Dancer," and "The Tropics of New York." His militant poem, "If We Must Die," was much quoted because of its forthright expression of the new Negro's attitude:

If we must die—let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.

If we must die—oh, let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead.

Oh Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
Though outnumbered, let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back.

McKay's later publications included fiction in novel and short story forms, a change which Brawley laments, because he believed the use of prose forms did not allow him an opportunity to give vent to the dynamic expression which characterized his poetry.

Following in the immediate wake of McKay were Langston Hughes, in whose early work is found abandonment of established literary forms, and the carrying out of the resolution of the younger Negro artists to "express our individual darkskinned selves without fear or shame"; Jean Toomer, who has been called the colored world's emancipator from the conventions of

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1 Ibid.

Rudolph Fisher, who is endowed with a keen perception and a fine sense of irony which he uses in giving a light touch to the novel of Negro life; Sterling Brown, whose capability in classic English is not to be overlooked, but who makes his best contribution in the form of proletarian protest through the voice of the humble worker; Zora Neale Hurston, who concerns herself chiefly with folk types and limns the unlettered Negro without apology; Jessie Fauset, who compliments the colored intelligentsia; and Arna Bontemps, who, though not identified with the "Harlem school," yet is to be regarded as a true apostle of the Negro Renaissance. George Schuyler, Gwendolyn Bennett, George Allen, and Lewis Alexander are a few of the other not so widely known writers, each contributing to the general spirit of the movement.

Another phase of literary advancement of major importance was the appearance of numerous literary magazines beginning in 1927 with Fire, "a quarterly devoted to the younger Negro artists." More recently has appeared Challenge, a publication issued from offices in New York and Boston. Magazines and annuals from colleges have also aided the young literarily-minded Negroes in having their poems and short stories put in printed form. Before the advent of the college publications, The Crisis and Opportunity were the two major sources for original expression. Later, however, all combined their efforts with the "poet's corner" of various newspapers to provide ample space for the poetry and prose of young colored writers.

At this point some attention should be given to those contemporary.

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3 W.E. B. DuBois and Alain Locke, op. cit., 163.
white Southern writers whose themes center around Negro life and characters. Their employment of Negro characters and situations, however, is limited to those Negroes who have retained their "simplicity and charm and irresponsible gaiety." The new Negro, Calverton has observed, represented at one extreme by the Negro bourgeoisie and at the other by the Negro intellectual who is largely a product of that bourgeoisie, does not interest most white writers; and consequently, however successful they have managed to avoid the sentimentalities of the old plantation school, these authors are much closer to the plantation tradition than they suspect. About the portrayal of the Negro in literature by persons who are not members of the race, Brawley has this to say:

...there is undue emphasis upon futility and fatalism....The upstanding, industrious, self-respecting Negro who actually succeeds in the battle of life is not mentioned. Instead there are constantly recurrent the fallacies that the education of the Negro has been a failure, and that the integrity of the womanhood of the race is always open to question. No matter how much evidence to the contrary there may be, any author of the day is likely to start out with one or the other of these assumptions.

With this rather cursory review of the cause and development of the Negro Renaissance only a few critical remarks remain to be made. There is no longer any doubt of the contribution that the Negro has made and is still making to American culture. The Negro Renaissance, which received its first real impetus at the close of the World War, has been a great advance towards wider literary horizons, social equality, and political and economic justice. Spiritually, the Negro's attitude was no longer one of acceptance of the inevitable, but it had become an attitude stimulated by a growing self-respect

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2 Ibid., p. 147.
and self-reliance. Consequently, the Negro author—previously dominated by a psychology of persecution which had received expression in what Redding has called "apologetic language, defeatist poetry, and apostate prose"—now began boldly to voice harangues and declarations. America was compelled to listen. Accordingly, Van Doren wrote:

If any evidence is needed, the volume Alain Locke's The New Negro (1925) is evidence that the new Negro is a civilized accomplished being, who not only has given the nation its most joyous dances...and its most characteristic music...but who has learned how to write lucid, cogent, and charming prose, which is one of the unmistakable signs of an advanced civilization.

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1 J. Saunders Redding, op. cit., p. 95.

Langston Hughes, one of the foremost participants in the Negro Renaissance, was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902. His maternal grandmother was of direct French and Indian descent, while his paternal forebears were of Jewish and Scottish extraction. His immediate parents are colored, his father being dark brown and his mother olive-yellow. Hughes considers his brown complexion a misfortune, for during his visit in Africa, where the word "Negro" means black, he was deeply hurt by the disbelief that registered on the faces of the natives when they were told he was a Negro. Expecting a black man, they refused to understand that, despite his color, he was a Negro—an American Negro.

Because of a separation that occurred between his parents, Langston was reared by his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas, until he reached the age of twelve. During those years, however, he spent some time with his mother, who worked at various jobs and traveled quite frequently. Consequently, before his twelfth birthday, he had lived in Mexico City; Topeka, Kansas; Colorado Springs; Charlestown, Indiana; Kansas City; and Buffalo. It was while he was in Topeka that his schooling was begun and that he was first exposed to the American race problem. Because of the distant location of the colored school in the town, Langston was admitted to the Harrison Street School, whose student body before his entrance had been entirely white. There, he says, he "learned early not to hate 'all' white people," and has since then seen the general good of most people "in every race and in every country."

Those lonely summers spent in Lawrence with his grandmother afforded young Langston an excellent opportunity for the cultivation of a love of
books, and it would hardly be out of place to turn to this early boyhood for the first signs of his literary leanings. The meager existence of grandmother and grandson compelled Hughes to rely upon the books of their scant collection for his chief means of recreation. Moreover, his grandmother related numerous stories to him of the days of bondage and the efforts of many sympathizers in the emancipation cause to free the Negro slaves, and of the vain attempts of many fugitives to escape the limitations of an enslaved life. Hers was a rich store of knowledge of those unforgettable days, and from her Langston learned early what pain and torment his ancestors had endured in the past. This proud old lady, who would never beg or borrow from anybody, gave Hughes an early education in the Bible and, by reading to him often as he sat on her lap, added much to the rapidly accumulating body of information from which he was to draw in later years for subject-matter. The experiences of those twelve years spent alternatingly in the company of his grandmother and mother strongly influenced the growth and thinking of the youth.

Hughes' grandmother died when he was twelve, and the nearly two years spent in the care of "Auntie Reed" are significant because of the indelible impression the incident involving the salvation of his soul, while a mourner in the colored country church, left upon his mind. Langston's failure to "see" Jesus at the crucial moment the preacher and good sisters expected him to, and the fact that he finally lied in order that the wearied congregation might be dismissed, evoked in him a disheartening sense of shame equaled only by two other emotional disturbances in his maturer life—the hatred he came to bear for his father, and the abrupt separation he made with his wealthy New York patron.¹

¹In reply to a request made by this writer for the name of this patron Hughes wrote: "I do not care to disclose the name of the patron mentioned in The Big Sea." (See Appendix, Letter 4) In all probability, this patron is Mrs. R. Osgood Mason. See Zora Neale Hurston, Dust Tracks on a Road (Philadelphia, 1942), p. 185.
In the meantime, Mrs. Hughes, having tried an unsuccessful reconciliation with her husband which resulted in the final legal separation of the two, married again; and one child was born of that union. Homer Clark, Langston's stepfather, was somewhat of a wanderer, one who was certainly not preoccupied with the accumulation of money as was the elder Mr. Hughes. Like his newly claimed bride, he considered money a thing to be made and spent for music and entertainment, not for the amassing of other wealth. By no means did Hughes, senior, belong in this category; his was one in which few Negroes can be classed. It was, perhaps, the streak of Jewish blood coursing through his veins that prompted his insatiable quest for money and power.

Langston attended grade-school in Lincoln, Illinois. His first occasion for exercising any poetic talent he might have had came when he was chosen poet of the graduating class. The choice of Hughes as class poet was fortunate for Negro literature, as prior to this time he had given no thought to the composition of poetry. Having been elected solely because he was a member of a race naturally supposed to possess a keen sense of rhythm, and because none of the other members of the class looked like poets or had even written verse, young Hughes composed his first and almost longest poem. It contained sixteen stanzas which were later altered, one half praising the teachers in the school, and the other half commending the class itself. Since then he has been expressing himself in various literary media. Doubtlessly, therefore, this election was the beginning of his active literary career.

Homer Clark, at this time living in Cleveland, sent for Langston, his mother, and little stepbrother. There the family encountered and tried to endure the discomforts of an extremely crowded Negro district, a condition caused by the post-World War migratory movement of Southern Negroes to Northern industrial centers. Langston entered Central High School and almost
immediately resumed his slow and arduous plod to professional authorship.

During his second year at Central High School, an English teacher, Ethel Weimer, introduced young Hughes to the work of Carl Sandburg as well as to that of Amy Lowell, Vachel Lindsay, and Edgar Lee Masters. He, himself, read the German authors Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the American novelists Edna Ferber and Theodore Dreiser, and the French novelist de Maupassant. Hitherto, the dialect poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Longfellow's "Hiawatha" were the only compositions in poetic form that he admired. Now he was attracted by the vigorous free verse of Carl Sandburg; and his first real poetic attempts were, he says, "little Negro dialect poems like Paul Laurence Dunbar's and poems without rhyme like Sandburg's."

Sandburg he used as a "guiding star" and, in imitation of him, wrote:

Carl Sandburg's poems
Fall on the white pages of his books
Like blood-clots of song
From the wounds of humanity.
I know a lover of life sings
When Carl Sandburg sings.
I know a lover of all the living
Sings then.

The early influence of Lindsay is revealed in The Weary Blues (1926), Hughes' first volume of poetry, in a characteristic Alain Locke has termed "descriptive detachment." His later prose works show his early acquaintance with the style of de Maupassant, who, according to Hughes, "made me really want to be a writer and write stories about Negroes, so true that people in far-away lands would read them—even after I was dead.

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1Langston Hughes, The Big Sea (New York, 1940), p. 28.
2Ibid., p. 29.
4Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 34.
But the four years at Central High School yielded much more than mere book learning. From his teachers, Langston learned patience and perseverance. His attendance at a mixed-school taught him that Negroes are not the only victims of an assumed attitude of superiority by native American whites but that the Negro's lot was the least endurable. These and similar impressions strongly influenced the mind and spirit of the sensitive youth, and helped mold that individualism that later pervaded his work as a mature writer.

Perhaps the most significant episode during Hughes' adolescence, in so far as its bearing upon his later life is concerned, was his visit to Mexico City as the guest of his father. The elder Hughes had built up quite a profitable business in law practice and investment; but making money had become an obsession with him, and to his son, this feverish effort to accumulate wealth rendered him a very repulsive individual. He schemed, stinted, bargained, and bought. He hated Negroes for their gaiety and indifference, and despised the peons for their laziness and filth. But most disgusting to Langston was his father's brutal way of rushing himself and everybody with whom he came in contact in an attempt to realize his heart's desire. To add to his desolation, the small Mexican town offered slight amusement for a young boy. Besides, James Hughes kept his son well occupied with the task of learning bookkeeping, which he knew would be necessary when Langston entered his business. As the boy had no interest in either bookkeeping or his father's business, that summer in Mexico turned out to be the most miserable he had ever known. In fact, before Langston returned to Cleveland that fall, he had grown to hate the man who was his father. James Hughes' obsession and disgusting nature, and the misery he had caused his son were more than young Hughes could endure. However, he graduated from Central High the following year as poet of his class for the second time, also holding the enviable honor
of Editor of the Yearbook.

During his high school days he had written many poems and jingles which he kept in a notebook. Some he had composed while visiting his father in Mexico, while others were motivated by various incidents and interesting or unusual people. The well-liked and oft-quoted poem "When Susanna Jones Wears Red," which appeared in The Weary Blues, was inspired by a meeting with a young colored girl with "big eyes and skin like rich chocolate" who sometimes wore a becoming red dress. The summer of his high school commencement saw the composition of perhaps his most famous piece, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," written while the author was enroute to Mexico City for the second time and feeling very depressed. A recent misunderstanding with his mother, which added to the discomfort resulting from the encounter with his father, left the youth a despondent individual for several years afterwards. During those years, he wrote some of his best poetry, for, as he has pointed out in The Big Sea, his largest in quantity and best in quality were done when he felt worst. When he was happy he wrote nothing. Aboard the train he recalled the dislike for all Negroes held by his father—a dislike possibly stimulated by the very discernible differences between the ambitions and practices of the average Negro and those of his own. Young Hughes considered this an unjustifiable reason for the detestation of the group as he, himself, liked Negroes very much, and found them "the gayest, and the bravest people" that had ever lived under such unfavorable circumstances. The sight of the southward flow of the muddy Mississippi, therefore, brought visions of other rivers that had been in the past experience of dark people—the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile—and he wrote:

I've known rivers;
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than
the flow of human blood in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers;
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

The result was the best Hughes had yet written. He submitted it to the critical appraisal of Jessie Fauset, then managing editor of The Crisis, who evidently thought well of it; for in June, 1921, it appeared in The Crisis and thus gained the distinction of being his first published poem.

Langston was aware that his father was the only possible means through which he could secure a higher education, and this was his primary purpose in going to Mexico again. This visit, however, was less unpleasant than the first, and he remained there an entire year working as a tutor in English to well-to-do Mexican families. He obtained this job when he and his father failed to agree upon the institution and place for the young man's college education, and promoting it energetically, he was able to save a little money. It was the first job he had held that offered him such an opportunity, although he had been busy at some small money-making tasks since grade school. Saving his money, and finally receiving his father's consent and pledged support, he entered Columbia University in New York during the fall of his nineteenth year. There the immensity of the place, the unfriendliness of the students, the indifference of the instructors, and his dislike for the subjects he was studying made the year an exceedingly distasteful one. His disappointment in the school he tried to alleviate through frequent visits

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to the ghetto of his dream—Harlem. He went there at every opportunity, neglecting his studies. Nevertheless, he completed his freshman year but determined not to return to Columbia. During the summer he worked on a truck-garden farm on Staten Island, and at the end of the season at a florist's. Throughout this period, however, the youth had been disturbed by a spirit of restlessness which he explains as follows:

But all those months in New York I'd kept remembering the smell of the sea on my first night in Vera Cruz as he journeyed from Mexico to New York. And it seemed to me now that if I had to work for low wages at dull jobs, I might just as well see the world, so I began to look for work on a ship. Accordingly, he got a job with the skeleton crew of a "mother-ship" which, to his disappointment, never left the harbor. That spring, with an excellent recommendation from the ship's steward, he received an assignment on a boat sailing for Africa. This was the beginning of a period of adventure, excitement, hardship, hunger, and hurt; but they were years that contributed considerably to the development of Langston Hughes.

Already mention has been made of the grave injury done the young poet's sensitive spirit when he was mistaken for a white American by Africans. Upon reaching the land of the Congo, he was also stirred by the confusion and disorder, the unrest and heavy oppression wrought by European and American traders—invaders, in truth. Segregation was practiced in missionary gatherings, and the wealth of Africa was slowly being confiscated. While traveling from port to port, from country to country, more than once he ran into cutting race conflicts. Later, when abroad in Italy and finding

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1 Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 89.

2 The mother-ship, Hughes explains, was usually an old one that remained in harbor with a skeleton crew to keep the machinery and cables of the "dead fleet" in condition. The dead-fleet consisted of those unseaworthy vessels of the first World War. Ibid., p. 91.
himself in a very bad way financially, he wrote an article about his trip to Africa which he sent to The Crisis, asking for the first time that he receive pay. It was accepted and published in the issue for December, 1923, under the title of "Ships, Sea and Africa--Random Impressions of a Sailor on His First Trip down the West Coast of the Motherland." Written in an impressionistic style, the memoir contains the reflective musings of the author as he sailed from one African port to another, viewing the small villages and their inhabitants.

"Secondee...The market flashing with colors, the piles of fruit, the dark girls in bright bandanas, gay strips of cloth twined around their bodies...The African princesses with gold coins in their hair.

"Lagos, a fascinating, half-oriental town...Indian bazzars...Muhammedan traders...Goats, dogs, pigs in the streets...Life, movement, crowds, dashing horses, rich Negroes driving expensive cars, a harbor full of ships...Seven days in port...Shore leave and money for the crew whose pounds, like Villon's francs, go 'tous aux tavernes et aux filles'."  

Such description as the picturesque sketch of an African boat crew, the sea, and the twilight demonstrate Hughes' instinctive talent for colorful detail, which is one of the many contributing factors to his later poetic success.

On his return to the States from Africa, Hughes sailed from New York to Holland. Upon arriving in Rotterdam, he left his ship and went by train to the French capital, where he experienced a cold and difficult winter, and narrowly escaped actual starvation. Two experiences highlighted his sojourn in Paris: a serious love-affair with "Mary," an attractive colored girl born of a white English woman and a cultured, wealthy African; and a meeting with Alain Locke, a sponsor of the Negro Renaissance and a professor at

1 Hughes, "Ships, Sea and Africa," The Crisis, XXVII (December, 1923), 69-71.
2 Ibid., 70-71.
Howard University.

Of the two, the meeting with Locke had much more influence upon Hughes' subsequent literary career. The learned professor had on several occasions tried to meet the young poet whose works had been appearing in *The Crisis* and in *Opportunity* since 1921. Hughes' reticent nature earlier caused him to avoid Locke and several other men of literary note. This time the meeting was inavoidable, as Locke came directly to his living quarters in Paris. He could hardly have regretted the meeting, because through the Howard professor he saw Paul Guillaume's famous collection of African sculptures, and, when he visited Venice that summer, he again encountered Locke, who showed him the palaces, churches, and famous paintings of that city. Pertinent to the later characterization of Hughes as the "people's poet" is the fact that, despite the glamour and grandeur of the world-famous structures, his dominant wish was to visit the slum areas of Italy. Always first and foremost was his interest in the masses.

A thief in the night delayed Hughes' return to Paris. In Genoa he awoke to find his money and passport missing; and, being alone in that city, Hughes confessedly got as hungry as he had ever been in his life. After several weeks of ill-luck, he finally secured work aboard an American boat bound for the United States. A grand tour of the Mediterranean terminated with his arrival in Harlem, twenty-two, slightly worn but well, and none the less gainful despite scores of mishaps.

The young author carried ashore with him several poems which he had found time to write between points of starvation and work at odd jobs. They were really few in number, because on a whole his journey had been a pleasant one, and only when he felt bad did he write frequently. His great admiration for the work of Countee Cullen, who was already a successful writer and very
much an integral part of the new Negro movement, induced Hughes to show the poems to him. Through Cullen he received an invitation to a benefit party where he was introduced to Walter White, of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; James Weldon Johnson, the internationally famous Negro poet and composer; and Carl Van Vechten, the author of *Nigger Heaven* (1926), a novel of Harlem life. This was his first social gathering of note. There he learned that his poems published in *The Crisis* had been widely read by influential folk who were eager to meet him.

By this time Hughes, having definitely decided to make writing his lifetime occupation, began a consideration of those factors necessary for the pursuit of this career. Planning first to complete his education, he discovered that such a resolution entailed more than mere aspiration. Either he must have money or influential connections. Possessing neither, he spent the next two years working at odd jobs in Washington, D.C. Except for his poetry and the friends he made through his writing, these years were very lonely and unhappy ones for him. Already he was acquainted with Walter White, Countee Cullen, and Carl Van Vechten. During one of his visits to New York, he met Mrs. Amy Spingarn, the noted philanthropist, and his frequent trips there threw him in contact with several members of the new Negro movement, including Zora Neale Hurston, Arna Bontemps, Rudolph Fisher, Wallace Thurman, Jean Toomer, and Nella Larsen. Winold Reiss, the portrait painter; Miguel Covarrubias, the Mexican artist; Waring Cuney and Gwendolyn Bennett, poets; and Augusta Savage, the sculptress, were also among his new acquaintances. Through Waring Cuney, at that time a promising Negro poet, he learned of Lincoln University. Cuney, already a student there, recommended Lincoln as especially affording sufficient time for reading and writing. Later, in New York, he casually mentioned his ambition to go there to a philanthropic
woman who, being sympathetic, offered him a scholarship that Christmas which he accepted. At mid-term of the school year 1925-26 Hughes entered Lincoln, where he remained until he obtained his bachelor's degree.

Hughes' life in Washington inspired him to write many poems in the manner of the Negro blues and the spirituals. Seventh Street of that city inspired his use of the blues as a poetic form. The ostentatious airs of Washington's Negro society forced the sensitive young man to find "sweet relief" in Seventh Street, "where the ordinary Negroes hung out, folks with practically no family tree at all, folks who drew no color line between the mulattoes and deep dark-browns, folks who worked hard for a living with their hands." In 1927, Opportunity published an essay written by Hughes in which he, severely satirizing the pretentions of the city's bourgeois Negro society, wrote:

... I have seen Washington, of which city I had heard much, and I have looked at something called 'society' of which I had heard much, too. Now I can live in Harlem where people are not so ostentatiously proud of themselves, and where one's family background is not of such great concern.

The appearance of this frank appraisal of the colored culture of Washington received much comment and criticism, most of which was unfavorable. For example, Brenda Ray Moryck, a resident of Washington, pronounced the article as showing rash reasoning and hastily drawn conclusions, and in refutation of it, she wrote:

Perhaps if Mr. Hughes had trod the training ground for a season as I did for several, he would have learned to skim off the froth from the cup which he would examine and look beneath for the essence to quaff. Diamonds and precious metals were never discovered on the crust of the earth. If one would seek

1Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 208.
for pearls, he must dive deep—and he who would have gold
must not be satisfied with the first handful of dross which
he scoops up when on his quest.

Mr. Hughes has been hasty,—for I, too, have lived in
Washington.¹

This early disapproval of his attack on middle-class smugness did not alter
Hughes' opinions. Instead it seemed incendiary, for the bulk of his writing
even in its maturer state has been characteristically an out-spoken, virile
assault upon the exploitation of the Negro masses. Nevertheless, this pre-
mature awakening of his scorn of Negro society stimulated Hughes' seeking a
means of escaping any connection with it by frequenting the "barrel houses"
and "shouting churches" of Seventh Street, where he got the ideas and often
the actual verses for many of his early blues poems and spirituals.

A poem entitled "The Weary Blues" was included among three submitted
informally to Vachel Lindsay, the author of "The Congo", a poem based on
African primitivism. Lindsay found in Hughes promise of a great poet, and
encouraged him to continue writing. Opportunity gave the poet a prize for
that same poem after he entered it in a contest conducted by that publica-
tion. In 1926, under the guidance of Carl Van Vechten, Hughes published a
volume of verse which he called The Weary Blues.

The themes of The Weary Blues are varied. The title poem, which recounts
the emotional release of a Lenox Avenue piano player through the blues,
carries a note of despondency. The American Negro no longer knows the pr-
mitive happiness that was his in the heart of his native land of freedom and
love. Depressed by a weariness born of a lonely and troubled existence, he
finds solace in singing a sad, sweet blues that usually ends in an expressed
desire for the comfort of death;

¹Brenda Ray Moryok, "I, too, Have Lived in Washington," Opportunity, V
(August, 1927), 243.
"I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied—
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died."

Other blues of the collection reflect the despair of individuals, especially of those who have loved not too wisely but too well. But more often the blues poems depict people lost in an urge to live and be happy today because tomorrow is fearfully uncertain. "Song for a Banjo" suggests the joy to be found in dancing:

Shake your brown feet, Liza,
Shake 'em Liza, chile,
Shake your brown feet, Liza,
(The music's soft and wil')
Shake your brown feet, Liza,
(The banjo's sobbing low)
The sun's going down this very night—
Might never rise no mo'.

But the jazz-boys in a Harlem night club dispel their blues through music:

Jazz boys, jazz boys,—
Play, play, play!
Tomorrow... is darkness
Joy today!

Then, there are Hughes' lyric poems, his tributes to the dark girl, which one reviewer has interpreted as being "at once a sublimation of the beautiful in the physical properties of the African race and its descendants as opposed to the physical characteristics of the Nordic race." "Songs to the Dark Virgin" is a superb expression of a black man's desire to satisfy an overwhelming love for a Negro girl, while "Ardella" praises the beauty of her eyes and the sweetness of her songs. But the admiration Hughes holds for

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2 Hughes, "Songs for a Banjo," Ibid., p. 36.
3 Hughes, "Harlem Night Club," Ibid., p. 32.
4 Augusta V. Jackson, op. cit., p. 173.
the dark girl is especially well expressed in the beautiful "To the Black Beloved":

Ah,  
My black one,  
Thou art not beautiful  
Yet thou hast  
A loveliness  
Surpassing beauty.

Oh,  
My black one,  
Thou art not good  
Yet thou hast  
A purity  
Surpassing goodness.

Ah,  
My black one,  
Thou art not luminous  
Yet an altar of jewels  
Would pale in the light  
Of thy darkness  
Pale in the light  
Of thy nightness.

The group that falls under the general heading of "Shadows in the Sun" is less racial in tone. Treating the theme of death, these poems present characters who are universally derived. The "Mexican Market Woman," far advanced in years, awaits her turn to die with calm complacency. The heroine of "Troubled Woman," wearied by the storm and strife of life, or the "silent woman who lies between two lovers--Life and Death," can be individuals of any race, creed, or color, for Death knows no distinction.

A third notable theme in the volume is one which appears throughout Hughes' career. Alain Locke has termed it a "quiet espousal of race," a

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1 Hughes, "To the Black Beloved," The Weary Blues, p. 65.
2 Hughes, "Mexican Market Woman," Ibid., p. 91.
3 Hughes, "Troubled Woman," Ibid., p. 86.
4 Hughes, "Sick Room," Ibid., p. 87.
5 Alain Locke, "Beauty Instead of Ashes," Nation, CXXVI (April, 1928), 433.
quality which is especially discernible in the oft-quoted "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," and in the "Proem" to The Weary Blues. In no other poet of this Renaissance group is there a keener awareness of the historic role of the Negro in world civilization and in America. From the white man's point of view it has been a minor role, lowly, almost humiliating in character; but Hughes asks for achievements superior to the unsurpassed beauty of the Egyptian pyramids; or to the supreme stateliness of the Woolworth Building, both erected by the toil of black hands. And to whom, asks Hughes, is America indebted for its only original music, the Negro spirituals and today's popular jazz tunes? The Negro has slowly emerged from a slave in the courts of Caesar to one who dreams hopefully of sharing the bounties of nature as well as the opportunities of democracy, only to have the brightness of that dream gradually enveloped in a shadow rising from the darkness of his skin and creating a thick impenetrable wall. Some "lie down in the shadow" of that wall, but others raise challenging, courageous voices that calmly yet persistently assert:

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother,
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll sit at the table
When company comes,
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed,—

I, too, am America.

The poems comprising the introduction and conclusion of *The Weary Blues* could hardly have been more discriminately selected or fittingly placed. Acquainting the reader in the "Proem" with the subject to be treated, the author presents various themes that show the status of the Negro in the world today. Though subjected to oppression, the black man has been progressive; he has sought relief in songs and work; he has had his dreams of freedom and independence continually shattered through reminders of his black skin. But he harbors no bitter resentment for the white man; he asks only an explanation for the continued infliction of castigation, chastisement, and torture:

I do not hate you,
For your faces are beautiful, too.
I do not hate you,
For your faces are whirling lights of loveliness and splendor, too.
Yet, why do you torture me,
O, white strong ones,
Why do you torture me?  

This patient endurance of an almost unrelenting punishment seems to spring from an unquestionable belief in

...tomorrow
Bright before us
Like a flame.
Yesterday
A night-gone thing
A sun-down name.
And dawn today
Broad arch above the road we came.

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2 Hughes, "White Ones," Ibid., p. 106.
3 Hughes, "Poem," Ibid., p. 108.
Also of significance, however, is Hughes' treatment of the nomadic urges of African descendants now inhabiting the American continent and "caged in the circus of civilization." It is the fourth distinct theme in the volume and characterizes those poems obviously composed when the vogue of primitivism was at its height. The jungle atmosphere of Harlem cabarets and an instinctive delight in primitive exhibitions are dominant themes in these compositions.

Hughes, like many members of the black masses, doubtlessly considered the removal of Africans from their native environment a grave mistake. In this land of conventional living these people have encountered the difficulties confronting any group suddenly transferred from their natural surroundings. Hence, he is not surprised that relief is sought in song and dance, in a joyous living that is almost barbaric despite the prevailing customs of their new existence. Their cry is for

...a land of sun,
Of gorgeous sun,
And a land of fragrant water
Where the twilight
Is a soft bandanna handkerchief
Of rose and gold
And not this land where life is cold.

...a land of trees,
Of tall thick trees
Bowed down with chattering parrots
Brilliant as the day,
And not this land where birds are grey.

...a land of joy,
Of love and joy and wine and song,
And not this land where joy is wrong.

In a land such as this there would exist no fear of a civilization that chains

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1 Hughes, "Lament for Dark People," Ibid., p. 100.

its subjects to an existence without warmth and color, that is rigid and cold, and that brings forth tears of loneliness, hurt and disillusion. It is best, Hughes reasons, that these instinctively nomadic people re-inhabit their fatherland where the life they would live

...would be simple again
Simple and clean
Like the earth, 1
Like the rain....

The tears, pain, and ironic mirth of this new life would be submerged in the joyous dream of a Negro youth who says it is his desire

To fling my arms wide
In the face of the sun,
Dance! Whirl! Whirl!
Till the quick day is done.
Rest at pale evening....
A tall, slim tree....
Night coming tenderly
Black like me. 2

The expression of this passion for freedom, for beauty, for escape from a world of restraint and sobriety found its way into the cabaret and night-club where jazz-bands exhilaratingly play gay tunes, or lamentfully sob sad ones, while "brown-skin steppers" sway and glide, or do intricate steps as though the worries of the world do not oppress their minds. Often these clubs are frequented by others who find untold joy in soothing their souls through a release of a natural desire for warmth, color, and unrestrained emotions.

White girls' eyes
Call gay black boys
Black boys' lips
Grin jungle joys.

Dark brown girls
In blond men's arms. 3

1Hughes, "Disillusion," Ibid., p. 104.
2Hughes, "Dream Variation," Ibid., p. 43.
3Hughes, "Harlem Night Club," Ibid., p. 32.
In a common eagerness to whirl and dance, races forget their distinguishing colors and nationalities. These sad and gay dancers, abandoning themselves to the rhythmic beat of a jazz music that truly interprets their mood, seem to whisper to each other:

The rhythm of life
Is a jazz rhythm,
Honey.
The gods are laughing at us.

The broken heart of love,
The weary, weary heart of pain,—
Overtones,
Undertones,
To the rumble of street cars,
To the swish of rain.

Lenox Avenue,
Honey.
Midnight,
And the gods are laughing at us.¹

Their is a gaiety mingled with sadness, a weariness born of conventional living. In the Harlem night clubs to jazz rhythms—exotic, barbaric tunes and tones—they forget the world and their puppet existence and give vent to instinctive feelings.

The Negro Renaissance largely owed its impetus to the unfettered emotions of Manhattan's black masses. The primitivist cult flourishing among contemporary authors and artists, white and black, of the decade past, brought attention to a trend of living that had been prevailing in Harlem for years.

White people began to come to Harlem in droves...flooding the little cabarets and bars where formerly only colored people laughed and sang, and where now the strangers were given ringside tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers—like amusing animals in a zoo.²

¹Hughes, "Lenox Avenue: Midnight," Ibid., p. 39.
²Hughes, The Big Sea, pp. 224-25.
As a result, the Negro became the fashion of the day. He was the object of observation for books and artistry, and interested Nordics encouraged young Negro authors to enrich their writings with the color and warmth, the sordidness and filth, the beauty and joy of black men's lives. Hence, the poetry, fiction, and art exhibitions that depicted the new-found Negro became the pattern of the age. And hence, *The Weary Blues*, which brings to the front a poet who has openly avoided adherence to traditional and conventional guideposts of literary form and content. Breathing an air of informality, these poems are a revelation of the shifting scenes and places which have been a part of the author's experience.

Criticism of Hughes' broad use of Negro themes has been made by professional and amateur reviewers who were afraid lest this newcomer to the field of writing would move in a seemingly fateful path which limits Negroes to racial art pure and simple. Hughes makes no effort to conceal the fact that most of his poems are racial and primitivistic. They are such, he says, because they are derived from the only life with which he is intimately acquainted. He wrote in June, 1929, after the publication of his first book, an article which openly defied any person's condemnation of the use of "racial themes and treatment" merely because it varies from the "national artistic norm".

...We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we...


know how, and we stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves.

With this daring resolution to express fearlessly and shamelessly his own thinking and experience, Hughes continued to write poems that Charlotte Taussig says "portray a ceaseless hunger for warmth and color and beauty," and, though not confined to an exclusive mood, are almost invariably personal in tone.

The popularity of the book and the recognition it brought to its author lie, perhaps, in the tranference of the tempo of jazz and swing from the cabaret into literature. Experimental in the attempt, it was a success. Simplicity of form, universality of subject-matter, and spontaneity of utterance are a few characteristics that caused critics to accept the young writer as one who had much originality and individuality to offer the literary world.

During the spring and summer of 1927, Hughes toured the South, visiting Fisk at Nashville and Beale Street in Memphis. In New Orleans, he was fascinated by the magical arts of voodoo and conjure, and found work aboard a freighter bound for Havana. A week later he was back in New Orleans, and thence went up to Georgia, where he was entertained by a famous conjuror in the company of Zora Neale Hurston.

After the publication of The Weary Blues, he became one of several who conceived the idea of publishing a Negro quarterly to be used as a medium for the younger Negro writers and artists. This publication, which was called Fire, was planned, Hughes said, "to provide us [the younger Negro writers and

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artists, with an outlet for publication not available in the limited pages of the small Negro magazines then existing.\footnote{Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 235.} Unfortunately, \textit{Fire} proved too hot for both literary critics and the public, and too expensive for the founders; and, consequently, only one issue left the press. The year 1927, however, did bring to the public Hughes' second volume of verse, \textit{Fine Clothes to the Jew}, which elicited severe criticism from major Negro critics and newspapers, but was enthusiastically received by white critics and literary publications.

\textit{Fine Clothes to the Jew} does not show the variety in subject matter and form characteristic of \textit{The Weary Blues}. Instead, it passes from jazz to an expansion of the blues form introduced in the earlier publication. An examination of the sections into which the author has divided the book reveals that two are devoted exclusively to the blues—a song-form expressing almost always a despondent mood and following "a strict poetic pattern: one long line repeated and third line to rhyme with the first two."\footnote{"A Note on Blues," Fine Clothes to the Jew (New York, 1927), p. 13.} A new theme is found in the section called "Railroad Avenue." It is the first indication of Hughes' concern with the working classes in his poetry—a theme which predominately saturates his compositions during the depression era. Several free verse lyrics treating the lowly occupations of the Negro boy and girl caused Margaret Larkin to recognize the proletarian tendency in this second collection. "Brass Spitoons" discusses the reflections of a young man occupied with the repulsive task of cleaning spittoons in hotels:

\begin{quote}
Clean the spitoons.
The steam in hotel kitchens,
\end{quote}
And the smoke in hotel lobbies,
And the slime in hotel spitoons;
Part of my life.

...  
A nickel,
A dime,
A dollar,
Two dollars
Buys shoes for the baby.
House rent to pay.
Gin on Saturday,
Church on Sunday
My God!
Babies and gin and church
And women and Sunday
All mixed up with dimes and
dollars and clean spitoons
and house rent to pay.\(^1\)

Hughes, himself, worked as a spittoon-cleaner when a youngster in school, and, although he never held a job as elevator operator, his acquaintance with hotels and the jobs they offer colored boys is adequate for him to write a forceful poem like "Elevator Boy";

\[
\begin{align*}
I & \text{ got a job now} \\
& \text{Runnin' an elevator} \\
& \text{In the Dennison Hotel in Jersey.} \\
& \text{Job ain't no good though.} \\
& \text{No money around.} \\
& \text{Jobs are just chances} \\
& \text{Like everything else.} \\
& \text{Maybe a little luck now,} \\
& \text{Maybe not.} \\
& \text{Maybe a good job sometimes;} \\
& \ldots \ldots \\
& \text{Maybe no luck for a long time.} \\
& \text{Only the elevators} \\
& \text{Goin' up an' down,} \\
& \text{Up an' down,} \\
& \text{Or somebody else's shoes} \\
& \text{To shine,} \\
& \text{Or greasy pots in a dirty kitchen.}\(^2\)
\end{align*}
\]

Running an elevator and cleaning spitoons are both disgusting to the performers;

\(^1\) Hughes, "Brass Spitoons," Ibid., p. 28.

\(^2\) Hughes, "Elevator Boy," Ibid., p. 38.
but more humiliating than either of those jobs is the one a porter holds in a railroad station, where he must be courteous, patient, and subservient to those people who make his living possible:

I must say
Yes, sir,
To you all the time.
Yes, sir!
Yes, sir!
All my days
Climbing up a great big mountain
Of yes, sirs!

Rich old white man
Owns the world.
Gimme yo' shoes
To shine.

Yes, sir!

Hughes reveals the position of the Negro girl in his poem "Ruby Brown." Her youth, beauty, and cleanliness have no chance to survive, because her colored skin denies her opportunities for a decent living:

She was young and beautiful
And golden like the sunshine
That warmed her body.
And because she was colored
Mayville had no place to offer her,
Nor fuel for the clean flame of joy
That tried to burn within her soul.

Miss Larkin has noted that poems in this vein "have their roots deep in the lives of the workers....They give voice to the philosophy of men of the people, more rugged, more beautiful, better food for poetry, than the philosophy of middle classes."³

Other divisions of the book discuss the lost-love lamentations of Beale

¹Hughes, "Porter," Ibid., p. 39.
Street dwellers and the old-time Negro revival meeting. Perhaps the only section that conforms most typically to the tone and tempo of *The Weary Blues* is "Songs from the Georgia Roads," which discloses the Negro's desire to escape the cares of life through love and laughter; although "Sport," and "Saturday Night," included in "Railroad Avenue," and "Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret," from "Songs of the Georgia Roads," carry a hint of the primitivistic element so prevalent in his first publication. Noticeable, however, is the change in spirit from recklessness to futility:

 Pawn yo' gold watch  
     An' diamond ring  
 Get a quart o' licker  
 Let's shake dat thing!  

     ...  
 Won't be nothin' left  
 When de worms git through  
 An' you's a long time  
 Dead  
 When you is  
 Dead, too.  

 So beat dat drum, boy!  
 Shout dat song!  
 Shake 'em up an' shake 'em up  
 All night long.  

 "The mood of the blues," Hughes informs us, "is almost always despondency."  

 Financial depression evoked this meaningful strain that gives the book its title from a Negro man obviously without a job:

 When hard luck overtakes you  
     Nothin' for you to do.  
 When hard luck overtakes you  
     Nothin' for you to do.  
 Gather up yo' fine clothes  
 An' sell 'em to the Jew.  

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1 Hughes, "Saturday Night," *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, p. 41.  
Because her lover has deserted her, a despondent young woman sings:

Ma sweet good man has
Packed his trunk and left.
Ma sweet good man has
Packed his trunk and left.
Nobody to love me;
I'm gonna kill ma self. ¹

While love and financial worries seem the dominant causes of unhappiness in Hughes' blues poems, they vary from these to a woman's dejection born of loose-living, a young girl's fear of growing old, or a youth's pensive yearning for home:

Homesick blues, Lawd,
'S terrible thing to have.
Homesick blues is
A terrible thing to have.
To keep from crying
I opens my mouth and laughs. ²

A melancholy, grievous sensation seems to course the length of the body and find relief in the sad, affecting song known as the blues. Despite its pathetic theme, its utterance brings gales of laughter from listeners. There has been a question in the minds of many as to the exact interpretation to be given the psychological or philosophical meaning of the blues. What state of mind do they represent? Are they expressive of a despondent inner feeling, or a tuneful rendition of something imaginary offered to make people laugh? One reviewer has concluded that the entire scheme of the blues—the diversified themes, the psychology or philosophy—is much "too complex to fit into any single pigeon-hole" that may be characterized as a typical mood. ³

The mood of the blues is undoubtedly representative of the creators themselves, "unlettered people who know an inner necessity to sing of their contacts with...

¹Hughes, "Suicide," Ibid., p. 20.
³Abbe Miles, "Real and Artificial Folk-Song," The New Republic, LI (June, 1927), 77.
Similarly constructed but expressive of religious meekness and repentance is the "shout," a poetic medium that also had its origin with Hughes. It is a flexible, poetic pattern so designed as to capture effectively the exclusive mannerisms of an old country preacher as he humbly sings:

Po' and black
An' humble an' lonesome
An' a sinner in yo' sight.

Several stanzas like the above one are rendered by an individual, while the congregation prayerfully responds:

Have mercy, Lord!

Very often the "shout" is an incidental caricature of the strict poetic pattern of the blues and is only distinguishable through the significant presence of a single line to be shouted following each stanza:

I'm deep in trouble,
Nobody to understand,
Lord, Lord!
Deep in trouble,
Nobody to understand
0, Lord!
Gonna pray to my Jesus,
Ask Him to gimme His hand.
Ma Lord!

Omitting the strophic single line and sung to the accompaniment of the plaintive hum of a guitar, the above poem could easily be the woeful lament of the weary blues.

These three original forms—jazz, the blues, and the shout—are what Redding has called experimental designs created because of the originator's desire to show the distinct difference between the racial thought and feeling

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1 Abbe Niles, op. cit.
3 Hughes, "Moan," Ibid., p. 51.
of the educated (professors, ministers, physicians, and social workers) and
the illiterate (domestics, porters, dock hands, factory girls, and street-
walkers).\(^1\) So dissimilar are the reflections and reactions of these two
groups, that Hughes has felt the dire need for a poetic form especially con-
trived to express this difference. In *The Weary Blues* and in *Fine Clothes
to the Jew* the use of the jazz motif and the blues and shout designs, re-
spectively, have been significant for two reasons: first, it is an initial
attempt to recapture in an authentic and unconventionalized form something
of the color, vitality, and free movement that characterize the spirit of
the Negro; and, second, it is one of the successful transferences of the
Negro from the character of a rural, banjo-playing darky to one more be-
fittingly suited to his new status in civilization.\(^2\)

Although the absence of diversity in the subject-matter of *Fine Clothes
to the Jew* has been previously pointed out, the volume nevertheless suggests
Hughes' broad thematic range. His sensitiveness to any manifestation of
beauty or ugliness is discernible in "Magnolia Flowers,"\(^3\) and the exceeding
bitterness of some of his reflections on past humiliations and wrongs
suffered by the Negro race is found in "Mulatto":

> I am your son, white man!
> Georgia dusk
> And the turpentine woods
> One of the pillars of the temple fell.
>
> You are my son!
> Like hell!

\(^1\) J. Saunders Redding, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
\(^3\) Hughes, "Magnolia Flowers," *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, p. 70.
The moon over the turpentine woods
The Southern night
Full of stars,
Great big yellow stars.
Juicy bodies
Of nigger wenches
Blue black
Against black fences.
0, you little bastard boy,
What's a body but a toy?

The scent of pine wood stings the soft night air.
What's the body of your mother?

Silver moonlight everywhere.
What's the body of your mother?

Sharp pine scent in the evening air.
A nigger night,
A nigger joy,
A little yellow
Bastard boy.¹

Despite its lack of varying themes, however, the volume is a valuable addition
to Negro literature. In one respect it falls behind the pace set by The
Weary Blues, but it goes beyond that collection in that it is demonstrative
of Hughes' realization of the necessity for individual Negro expression, an
expression peculiarly adapted to the group alone.

At the end of his junior year at Lincoln, Hughes entered a new field and
began Not Without Laughter. Though started in 1928, this novel did not reach
the public until 1930. The ideas for the book had been slowly developing in
Hughes' mind prior to the year he began composition. His desire was "to write
about a typical Negro family of the Middle West"² with characters similar to
those he had known in Kansas. Hence, the creation of Sandy, the little
tawny-haired, ambitious hero of the story, who is in a large measure the

¹Hughes, "Mulatto," Ibid., p. 71.
²Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 303.
author himself as a youngster; Aunt Hager, his grandmother, loved by black and white alike; her three daughters: Tempy, the eldest, married to a colored postman and doing well; Anjee, Sandy's mother and wife to the "likeable scapegrace" Jimboy; and Harriett, Hager's youngest, joy-loving daughter. Although Sandy's life is the main skein of this story of a Negro family's up's and down's, Aunt Hager guides the process of its development. From the beginning she wants to see her children educated and contributing to Negro progress, but one by one they disappoint her. Tempy is much too busy with her imitation of white folks' living to be of any assistance to her race, and Anjee lives only for her wandering husband. Harriett has been so embittered by her experiences with race prejudice and advances from white men that her view of life is much too warped for universal gain. Hager realizes that in Sandy, her young grandson, lies her last hope, and she begins early to train and guide the boy's mind in the channels of racial deliverance. Stories of slavery, of Booker T. Washington's teachings, and regular attendance at school constituted the early features of Sandy's rearing.

As a novel, the book lacks plot. It is primarily a relation of experiences affecting the lives of the little family, experiences that characterize the individuals more than relate a story. Sandy is living with his mother, grandmother, and Aunt Harriett in a small town in Kansas, playing with other colored children, going to a mixed school, and developing into a likeable young fellow. When he is about thirteen his mother leaves him with his grandmother while she goes to Detroit to be with Jimboy. Aunt Hager dies a few years later, and Tempy takes Sandy to live with her. There he is exposed to the pretentious living of colored people who are of the opinion that the race problem can be solved only through an attempt to show the whites that the blacks can be as upstanding as they. The late spring of his sixteenth year finds him traveling to Chicago to join his mother, who had not
been able to keep up with her wandering husband. In Chicago, Sandy gets a job as elevator boy in one of the hotels and plans to continue his education at the insistence and with the aid of his Aunt Harriett. The story ends at this point, leaving the reader without doubt as to the man Sandy would eventually become, but wishing they could follow other inevitable experiences that he would meet while developing into that particular individual.

The book is likewise occupied with rebellious Harriett, who hates all white people for their superior airs and finds release for her musical soul in singing the blues. In this joy-loving character—"wanting a good time...being lively...and trying to be happy"—is seen a strain of the primitivistic that is apparently fading from the works of Hughes. Life, Harriet reasons, has mistreated her in more ways than one. She was born black, poor, and of a Christian mother. She is a member of a civilization which frowns upon an indulgence in the natural and instinctive. Yet, unaltered was her desire for unrestrained love and freedom. This caused a defiance of society and of her mother's teaching, and a turning toward the way of life which would allow a fulfillment of that desire. Although in the story Sandy is more important than this young Negro girl, her character is one of the most impressive of the group, and the reader can see in her material for another interesting novel.

Not Without Laughter is moderately concerned with the trials of hard-working, forbearing Anjee, who toils and lives for her Jimboy's infrequent visits home; with the plaintive blues songs of the amiable and indulgent Jimboy, who had an original philosophy about women which he taught his adoring son Sandy; with Tempy's one concern—to be as near white as she could, putting away "niggerish" things, living and speaking as Nordics do; and with the thoughts and feelings of the patient and understanding Aunt Hager.
There are lesser characters, clearly individualized and developed, who contribute to the full-bodiedness of the book, and even passages that treat the white side of the town, e.g., the relationships of white employers with colored cooks and laundresses.

Despite its slightness and the lack of memorable situations and of "high points of intensity to grip and overpower the reader," Not Without Laughter has received commendation, being listed by Oscar Cargill "as one of the best fictional treatments of the Negro in American letters." The reader enthusiastically follows the meager plot and is deeply moved by the trials of the characters. As the title suggests, the story is "not without laughter," nor is there lacking that sympathetic understanding of one another's difficulties which is characteristic of the black people and exhibited in the person of Aunt Hager. In such well-done chapters as "Storm," "Guitar," and "Dance," the style palpitates with the characteristic nature of America's dark folk--their trust in God; their moaning, crying, heartrending blues songs; and their music and dancing in which they release their cares and succumb to the rhythmic beat of a jazz rhythm. In consideration of the success of Not Without Laughter, Herschel Brickell would add Hughes' name to the "long list of contemporary poets who have turned with genuine success to the prose medium."

In 1929 Hughes graduated from Lincoln University, and the years spent

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1 V. F. Calverton, "This Negro," *The Nation*, CXXXI (August, 1930), 158.
4 Ibid.
there were exceedingly gainful in more than one respect. It was his good fortune to be introduced to an elderly Park Avenue matron who manifested a genuine interest in Hughes and his work. She urged him to complete his novel and, upon his graduation from college, gave him a generous stipend which permitted him for the first time to have freedom from financial strain as well as ample time for literary activity. After Not Without Laughter, however, Hughes' literary output was comparatively scant. The public was expecting, and justly so, a swift flow of productivity; but for three years after the publication of his second volume of verse, he did not publish an additional poetic compilation. Magazines, it is true, were at intervals printing a few of his poems, and in 1929 he worked on a drama called Mulatto which was not produced until 1935, but on a whole these years were barren of verse. In 1931, however, there appeared two small books; one, The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations, revealing the poet's growing interest in dramatic expression; the other, Dear Lovely Death, containing twelve short poems, eight of which collectively treat the subject of death. The two volumes, which received little publicity and had limited circulation, are demonstrative of a new trend of thinking on the part of the author, and of his contemplation of the use of a different medium of expression, drama.

The Negro Mother compositions are six in number and racial in subject-matter. The first poem, "The Colored Soldier," is an ironic leer at American
democracy and is expressive of the bitter hatred harbored by disillusioned Negro youths who fought in France, while "The Black Clown" strikes against the social and political injustices suffered by the Negro at the hands of a majority group largely concerned with class and race distinctions. The title poem follows the Negro mother from Africa, across seas in a slave ship, and through enslavement and subsequent sacrifices for the future freedom of her children. Similar to Hughes' "Mother to Son" in The Weary Blues are the last six lines—a fervent plea to Negro youth:

But march ever forward, breaking down the bars.
Look ever upward at the sun and the stars.
Oh, my dark children, may my dreams and my prayers
Impel you forever up the great stairs—
For I will be with you till no white brother
Dares keep down the children of the Negro mother.

"Florida Road Workers" in Dear Lovely Death seems oddly placed among a group of poems so dissimilar in tone and tempo. A Negro road builder engaged in constructing broad highways for the expensive automobiles of wealthy white men singularly voices the sentiments of those working with him.

Sure,
A road helps all of us
White folks ride—
And I get to see 'em ride.
I ain't never seen nobody
Ride as fine before.
Hey buddy!
Look at me!
I'm making a road.

The poem is a further indication of a growing proletarian outlook that makes its first appearance in the poems "Railroad Avenue," "Brass Spitoons," "The Fighter," "Elevator Boy," "Saturday Night," and "Songs from the Georgia Roads,"


all of which are found in Fine Clothes to the Jew. However, the other poems—sometimes vibrant, sometimes wistful—are lyrically and melodiously expressive of the subject of death:

Dear lovely Death
That taketh all things under wing—
Never to kill—
Only to change
Into some other thing
This suffering flesh,
To make it either more or less,
But not again the same—
Dear lovely Death
Change is Thy other name.

In 1932 Hughes selected poems previously printed in The Weary Blues and Fine Clothes to the Jew and added them to a few original pieces to form The Dream Keeper and Other Poems. This volume, written primarily for young people, was favorably received by some of Hughes' formerly severest critics. Benjamin Brawley, who was among the first to frown openly upon primitivism in Hughes' poetry, declared this book one of the best things the young poet had done. The lyrical beauty of his shorter poems, the light-hearted songs, some stanzas that are serious, and the inclusion of several typical blues poems make the selection enjoyable and appealing to the poetically sensitive nature of younger readers.

During the same year, Hughes, in collaboration with Arna Bontemps, a Negro writer primarily of poetry and juvenile stories, published Popo and Fifina, Children of Haiti, another small book for children with illustrations.


2 The Dream Keeper and Other Poems contains fifty-nine poems in all, thirty-six of which were taken from The Weary Blues and Fine Clothes to the Jew unaltered. This indicates that less than half of the poems in this volume were appearing in book form for the first time.

by the rising young Negro artist, E. Simms Campbell. It is a travel book, factual but unconsciously so. The story treats the adventurous wanderings of Popo and Pifina, two Negro children living on the island of Haiti, when their parents, wearied of the monotonous work of farming, moved to a small village near the sea. There Papa Jean becomes a fisherman, and Mama Anna is occupied with domestic duties, and there also little Popo begins his new adventures. Comparable to the freedom-loving spirit of Harriet in *Without Laughter* is little Popo's innate tendency towards primitivistic urges, an inclination pointed out by the Haitian author Rene Pequion in *Un Chant Nouveau* (1940), a study of the literary works and activities of Langston Hughes. Pequion writes: "Excité par le rythme des tambours, propitant du sommeil de ses parents, il se sauve dans la nuit pour répondre à l'appel de la terre et de la race."¹

The beautiful style attained by Bontemps and Hughes is one of the major merits of the book. With a background as picturesque as that pervading the island of Haiti, and with real and homelike subjects, the story is read with lively interest by millions of Children in the United States. Doubtlessly, as Pequion observes, Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps "ont enrichi d'un chef-d'oeuvre la littérature enfantine."²

The literature of the Negro Renaissance shows new trends in thought that reflect the Negro author's shift from stereotyped characterizations and materials that stressed racial exploitation to a self-revelation and self-criticism that produced writings greater in artistic value. That Langston

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² Ibid., p. 153.
Hughes figured prominently in this transition through his works is manifested in the volumes already treated. In *The Weary Blues* the author emphasizes the primitivistic qualities of the American Negro; in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* he undertakes to design new poetic patterns to express racial moods; and in *Not Without Laughter* he creates a young hero who is determined to share in the liberation of the entire black race. All three works view the Negro from an angle different from that of previous years, emphasize individuality, and reveal a new self-reliance among the race. Although *The Negro Mother, Dear Lovely Death, The Dream Keeper*, and *Popo and Fifina* did not receive the public acknowledgement accorded Hughes' earlier works, they are also indicative of this new trend.

In addition, these works establish distinctive features characterizing Hughes' style of writing. Suited to his effort to design a poetic pattern capable of recapturing the spirit of long oppressed black people and their late re-awakening was the "vers-librism" already being used by some American writers of the Sandburg school. Hughes had an early exposure to the works of Carl Sandburg and chose to pattern his poetry after this non-rhyming fashion. In *The Weary Blues* poems like "The Jester," "As I Grew Older," and "Summer Night" bear the earmarks of a Sandburgian influence, while in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* "Laughers" and "Mulatto" show a similar imprint. Equally influential was Dunbar's poetry which evidently helped Hughes to develop a poetic expression adaptable to the Negro mood. Understandable, then, is the employment of dialect in much of the verse of Hughes and Dunbar. They, apparently, were able to perceive the gain in the use of a tongue native to the American Negro, and with its appearance in Hughes' poetry almost immediately a comparison was made between the two writers. True enough, "both
set out to interpret the soul of the race,"¹ but where Dunbar clearly failed, Hughes early experienced a certain measure of success that can largely be attributed to his broad use of varying characters and themes. In Dunbar's poetry Negroes were one of three types: the slightly amusing, the slightly tragic, or the convincingly comic. In Hughes' work, however, is found little of the amusing or comic. First of all, he is objectively concerned with the masses, for to him they furnish the richest, most colorful background for poetry; and subjectively, he is likewise occupied with their affairs, their woes, and undertakes to interpret them through the poetic medium.

The sensitive, high-spirited, poetic imagination of this young Negro, strengthened by a picturesque and rambling existence flows freely in The Weary Blues, Fine Clothes to the Jew, and Not Without Laughter, as well as through the later publications of this period, producing a literature mainly in the racial vein, subjectively bespeaking the hearts of Negro America.

¹Wallace Thurman, "Negro Poets and Their Poetry," The Bookman, LXVII (July, 1928), 560.
²Ibid.
The post-war boom of the 1920's resulted in one of the most severe national depressions in American history. To no one factor alone could such an adverse condition be attributed; but because of over-expansion in agriculture, industry, and frantic monetary speculation, the American people awoke October 29, 1929, to find themselves facing acute financial distress. The spirit of the population was temporarily paralyzed, and their usual spontaneity and aggressiveness were curbed. Idle machines made idle men, and unfortunately more idle Negro men than those of any other group. As Hugh M. Gloster has written:

...Bereft of employment and bearing the double burden of color and caste, they endured disadvantage and privation in all sections of the United States. In the South they winced under a vicious sharecropper and tenant-farmer system; and in the North, where they had prospered during the boom period, they fell into the clutches of over-crowding, poverty, crime, and disease.1

The turn of the decade of the 1920's to the 1930's produced major changes in living and in literature. That period of luxurious living, when people were generally able to obtain the necessities of life and concerned themselves with an animalistic indulgence in emotional desires, was replaced by one of strikes, suicides, and food riots—a struggle with life and death. In literature, an exaltation of the primitivistic had prevailed. Fictionists such as Ernest Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis, and Ludwig Lewishon had achieved fame in characterizing the estranged woman, the habitual drunkard, and the

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narrow-minded citizens and business buffoons of small towns, or successfully experimented in the rapidly expanding social literature. The poets had followed the "vers libre" patterns of the Lindsay-Sandburg school, and adopted the naturalistic, satiric or realistic viewpoint exercised in fiction. These writers now found themselves involved in a rapidly expanding proletarian ideology. Also, with the change of the decade, came an end to the Negro Renaissance, a product of the period of inflation and overproduction in which bored Americans turned to Harlem for interesting and entertaining diversions. The Negro was no longer in vogue, for extravagance, which had been the major indulgence of the boom period, was supplanted by poverty. In keeping with current moods and thoughts altered by the depression from a primary concern with caste to a definite and distinct interest in class, literary activities revolved around the proletarian ideology contending for an organized working class. Such an organization, it was believed, would combat exploitation, unemployment, poverty, disease, war, and degradation inevitably experienced by this group through competitive and monopolistic capitalism. The growth of proletarianism had been a slow one. Although the movement had sprung up in the first two decades of the twentieth century, it was not until the organization in 1926 of The New Masses, spokesman of proletarian ideology and descendant from The Liberator, formerly The Masses, that "a stirring medium


2 The Masses (1911) was the first American publication in which proletarian ideology attained literary focus. Under the editorship of Max Eastman, its influence upon the younger generation was dynamic; but, because of the editor's grave concern for contemporary "art-forms," its literary output inadequately met its aim. Pre-war surroundings caused a conversion of The Masses into The Liberator, which published important proletarian materials and in 1924, combined with Soviet Russia Pictorial and Labor Herald to form The Workers Monthly. The New Masses, devoted mainly to the creative field, and The Modern Quarterly, chiefly critical, are the contemporary instruments of proletarian propaganda. See Calvert, op. cit., pp. 450-467.
for the communication of social protest of proletarian cast" was directly provided for the workers themselves. As a result, its teachings were scattered throughout the country during the depression years.

The expansion of the proletarian tradition in American literature during the decade 1929-39 was rapid. Writers active in this movement were not necessarily members of the working class; sometimes they were middle-class authors driven into the ranks of the proletariat by the widespread economic crisis. They were writers who, according to Calverton, were "imbued with a proletarian ideology instead of a bourgeois one...more interested in social revolt than in literary revolt...and believed that their literature can serve a great purpose only when it contributes, first, toward the destruction of present-day society, and, second, toward the creation of a new society which will embody...a social, instead of an individualistic, ideal."

That the left-wing movement advocated interracial action is, perhaps, the most significant phase of its teaching in so far as the Negro race is concerned. This movement, together with the depression years, was unequaled in re-directing the Negro's thinking from race to class channels. Immediately after the World War, the Negro considered his color and his African background praiseworthy attributes, and Negro scholars brought attention to merits of primitive African art. Negro literature was mainly racial, as race writers set up a type of propaganda called "poetry of protest." The disastrous years following 1929 saw a definite transition in social thought and written expression. In a large measure, race relations were temporarily forgotten in

1Ibid., p. 458.
2Joseph Freeman's critical introduction to Granville Hicks, et.al., eds., op. cit., p. 13.
the national struggle for survival. Black and white workers—tenant-farmers, miners, factory-hands, stevedores—and those unfortunates without jobs, united in strikes and hunger-marches. Employment agencies that had previously sustained rigid color restrictions now made small openings for Negro workers. Attracting national attention were the Herndon and Scottsboro cases because of their demonstration of interracial cooperation. In both instances black and white workers stood as a unified whole against the unwarrantable convictions of condemned Negroes.

Among the intelligentsia, outstanding Negroes in politics, music, and literature gave support to proletarian ideals. James W. Ford, a member of the Communist Party in 1926, became its candidate for the vice-presidency of the United States in 1932 and 1936. Paul Robeson, preeminent in the fields of drama and music, withdrew from the fashionable West End stage to affiliate himself with the Worker's Unity Theater in London, saying:

"When I sing 'Let My People Go', I want it in the future to mean more than it did before. It must express the need for freedom not only for my own race. That's only part of the bigger thing. But of all the working class...here, in America, all over, I was born of them. They are my people. They know what I mean."1

Novelists like Walter White, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and W. E. B. DuBois had previously selected their characters from the more enlightened and prosperous members of the race. Today Langston Hughes, along with Richard Wright, is a representative Negro writer presenting in his works proletarian types and definitely identifying himself with the left-wing movement. Although proletarian tendencies were noticeable in Hughes' earlier works, it was not until the publication of Scottsboro Limited: Four Poems...

and a Play in Verse (1932) that this association loomed prominent. His later works expressing proletarian ideology include one short story in The Ways of White Folks (1934); two dramas, Don't You Want to be Free (1938) and The Front Porch (1939); and a volume of verse, A New Song (1938). Various magazines printed other poems and articles that are also indicative of Hughes' proletarianism and left-wing leanings.

Prior to the publication of Scottsboro Limited in 1932, Margaret E. Larkin pointed out that certain poems in Fine Clothes to the Jew were evidence that Hughes was seeking new mediums, and because of these poems—"Railroad Avenue," "Brass Spitoons," "Prize Fighter," and "Porter"—gave him the title of "Proletarian Poet." But the definite transition from race consciousness to class consciousness occurred in 1930, when Hughes composed a poem called "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria," which was modeled after an advertisement appearing in Vanity Fair, a publication for the social elite, announcing the opening of New York's most fashionable hotel. Concerning the opening, Hughes wrote in The Big Sea:

The hotel opened at the very time when people were sleeping on newspapers in doorways, because they had no place to go. But suites in the Waldorf ran into thousands a year, and dinner in the Sert Room was ten dollars! (Negroes, even if they had money, couldn't eat there. So naturally, I didn't care much for the Waldorf-Astoria.) The thought of it made me feel bad, so I wrote this poem....

Instead of being addressed to the rich bankers and Park Avenue dwellers "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria" asked patronage from the most destitute victims of the Wall Street crash in 1929:

1 Margaret E. Larkin, op. cit., 84.

2 Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 321.
....get proud and race back; everybody! The new Waldorf-Astoria's open!
(Special siding for private cars from the railroad yards)

You ain't been there yet?
(A thousand miles of carpet and a million bathrooms.)
What's the matter?
You haven't seen the ads in the papers? Didn't you get a card?
Don't you know they specialize in American cooking?
Ankle on down to 49th Street at Park Avenue. Get up off that subway bench tonight with the Evening Post for cover! Come on out o'that flop-house!
Stop shivering your guts out all day on street corners under the El.
Jesus ain't you tired yet!

This ironic order was directed not to Negro people alone, but to all those desperate, hungry, tired, and jobless folk who had slaved in mines and factories so that rich owners might draw the dividends and grow rich, prosperous, and enjoy a luxurious life of plenty. It was the author's first important indication of concern for all humanity. Swept along with the growing tide of poverty and despair, viewing the misery of black and white alike as he rode in an expensive limousine from his comfortable apartment to well-prepared dinners at his patron's, to theaters, operas, and musicals, he realized that he "could very easily be there, too, hungry and homeless on a cold floor any time Park Avenue got tired of supporting him." Such a realization was probably the motive for his change from themes purely racial in tone and content to ones demanding justice for all humanity.

The composition of this poem and the subsequent reading of it by his wealthy patron were the cause of the first and final break between the poet and his sponsor. This woman was rich, generous, powerful, and these qualities, combined with her brilliant personality, won for her friends from all walks

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1 Hughes, "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria," Ibid., p. 323
2 Ibid., p. 320
of life. Her interest in people, movements, new trends, books, and cultural achievements in general was deep. Concerning her attitude towards Negroes, Hughes said:

"...she felt that they were America's great link with the primitive, and that they had something very precious to give to the Western World. She felt that there was mystery and mysticism and spontaneous harmony in their souls, but that many of them had let the white world pollute and contaminate that mystery and harmony, and make something cheap and ugly, commercial and, as she said, "white." She felt that we should keep it pure and deep."

Understandable, then, was her interest in Hughes. Reading his poetry of previous years, as well as his novel Not Without Laughter, she had found his work demonstrating the primitivist strain supposedly predominant in Negro people. If Hughes were sufficiently urged and given the proper guidance, she felt that her desire to see this "precious something" presented to the Western World could be realized through him. Unfortunately, the depression years intervened, altering the young author's views from an individual and racial outlook to definite class consciousness. This latest poem, expressive of the transition in man and time, caused benefactress and beneficiary to become aware of the dissimilarity between their personal opinions of the Negro. On this point Hughes wrote:

"She wanted me to be primitive and feel the intuitions of the primitive. But unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro—who had loved the surface of Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem. And I was not what she wanted me to be. So, in the end it all came back very near to the old impasse of white and Negro again, white and Negro—as do most relationships in America."

No longer, therefore, was his dream an impassioned desire to escape "the circus of civilization" through song and dance, or a plaintive cry to God

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1 Ibid., p. 316.
2 Ibid., p. 325.
to show him which way to go, or an emphasis upon race relations. He began to
dream of a union of the whole oppressed world, white and black—a dream that
clashed forcefully with the plan his well-meaning patron had devised. Con-
sequently, the two parted. The poet, no longer supported, returned to his
former existence and, at last, found himself an integral part of the poverty
and wretchedness that evoked "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria." A deep,
cutting disappointment resulting from the discontinued relationship with the
woman who had really failed to understand him after all, made a deep impression
upon Hughes' sensitive nature. In December, 1930, Opportunity printed a poem
called "Pride," later included in A New Song, which may easily be an ex-
pression of the bitterness felt by Hughes toward his former benefactress:

For honest work
You proffer me poor pay.
For honest dreams
Your spit is in my face,
And so my fist is clenched—
Too weak I know—

But longing to be strong
To strike your face!

But in 1939, he wrote the poem entitled "Poet to Patron," which is likely a
proud defiance of the woman he had greatly admired, but who caused him an
almost inexpressible hurt some nine years earlier. He said:

What right has anyone to say
That I
Must throw out pieces of my heart
For pay?
For bread that helps to make
My heart beat true,
I must sell myself to you?

A factory shift's better,
A week's meager pay,
Than a perfumed note asking;
"What poems today?"

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2 Hughes, "Poet to Patron," The American Mercury, XLVII (June, 1939), 147.
The year 1931 found Hughes continuing in the vein begun in "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria." The New Mases carried a poem called "Union," which later appeared in A New Song. This poem presents Hughes as a proletarian spokesman stating this realization:

Not me alone—
I know now—
But all the whole oppressed
Poor world,
White and black,
Must put their hands with mine
To shake the pillars of those temples
Wherein the false gods dwell
And the worn-out actors stand
Too well defended.¹

The following year The Negro Worker,² a publication advancing proletarian ideology, included among its works a poem by Hughes entitled "Good-bye Christ," a radical work which asserted a denial of the Christian way of life:

Goodbye
Christ Jesus Lord God Jehovah,
Beat it on away from herenow.
Make way for a new guy with no religion at all—
A real guy named
Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker Me—
I said me;
Go ahead on now,
You're getting in the way of things, Lord.
...
Move!
The world is mine from now on.³

Aggressively advancing social protest and Communistic propaganda, Scottsboro Limited made its appearance in 1932 subsequent to the nationally famous Scottsboro case in which eight Negro youths, having stolen train rides to different cities in search of work, were accused of raping two white

¹Hughes, "Union," A New Song, p. 31.
²The Negro Worker, a semi-monthly magazine, is the Organ of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers organized in Hamburg, Germany.
³Hughes, "Goodbye Christ," The Negro Worker (Hamburg, Germany, 1932).
girls who were aboard one of these trains. The falsity of the accusation and the injustice of the trial attracted the attention and support of the Communist Party, which was then seeking the confidence of the Negro in their program for a union of all workers. The four poems dramatically set the scene for the drama. Justice, Hughes described as a

....blind goddess
....to which we blacks are wise.
Her bandage hides two festering sores
That once perhaps were eyes.¹

The plight of the eight Negro boys, proving the futility of certain individual and group efforts to free the world of hate and exploitation, is pictured in the poem "Scottsboro":

Christ
Who fought alone.
John Brown.
That mad mob
That tore the bastile down
Stone by stone.
Moses.
Jeanne d'arc.
Dessalines.
Nat Turner.
Fighters for the free.²

A sardonic caricature of the Southerner's Christ comes in "Christ in Alabama," where Hughes portrays Jesus as a "White Master" holding the same prejudices towards the Negro as those held by white Alabamians. The last poem delineates the town of Scottsboro itself:

Scottsboro is just a little place;
No shame is writ across its face—
Its court, too weak to stand against a mob, ³
Its people's heart, too small to hold a sob.

¹ Hughes, "Justice," Scottsboro Limited: Four Poems and a Play in Verse (New York, 1932). The pages in this volume are not numbered.
² Hughes, "Scottsboro," Ibid.
³ Hughes, "The Town of Scottsboro," Ibid.
The characters of the drama include the eight condemned boys: a white man, representative of Southern sentiment towards the Negro, and playing the quadruple role of a typical Alabamian, a Southern judge, jailer, and preacher; two white women, base, degraded, and endorsing the Sheriff's accusations; eight white workers proclaiming Communistic doctrines; and various voices from the audience chorusing the opinions of a Southern white mob. In the opening scene the convicted youths ascend the stage and re-enact the actual occurrences during the train ride—their ejection from the box-car by the sheriff; the emergence of the white women, and the sheriff's no-more-than-expected conclusions; their mock trial; and their subsequent condemnation to the electric chair. The rest of the play is a militant and indignant cry against Southern injustice, and closes with the Negro boys declaring a union with the Reds, courageously avowing "to live, not die!"

All the world, listen!  
Beneath the wide sky  
In all the black lands  
Will echo this cry  
"I will not die!"

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Too long have my hands been idle  
Too long have my brains been dumb.  
Now out of the darkness  
The new Red Negro will come;  
That's me!

Powerfully propagandistic, the play was first published in The New Masses. The author is spirited in his attempt to relate the martyrdom of the Scottsboro boys to the oppression of the Negro folk. Only, he declares, through a union of black and white to "build the right" can the suffering and oppression of all workers find relief:

1 Hughes, "Scottsboro Limited," Ibid.

Black and white together
Will fight the great fight
To put greed and pain
And the color line's blight
Out of the world
Into time's old night.


Together, black and white,
Up from the darkness into the light.

Hughes has thus become the proletarian reformer, but significant is the fact that he has selected the unjust practices of Southern courts, acutely suffered by Negro people as the basis for his initial propagandistic publication. This selection is evidence of a not wholly outgrown race-consciousness which was so dominant in his pre-depression works. The mood of "Christ in Alabama" suggests the same lingering tendency. But with this exception, Scottsboro Limited—the play and the four poems—doubtlessly establishes Hughes as a proletarian writer. Although Communist characters make their entrance only in the latter portion of the play, proletarianism is plainly the underlying philosophy of a conversation held in the first half comparing the plight of the poor white man with that of the Negro.

Look a-yonder you-all, at dem fields
Burstin' wid the crops they yields.
Who gets it all?
White folks
You mean de rich white folks.
Yes, 'cause de rich ones owns de land.
And they don't care nothing 'bout de po' white man
You's right. Crackers is just like me—
Po' white and nigger, ain't neither one free.

When Scottsboro Limited was being circulated during the summer of 1932—Hughes was continuing his proletarian activities in Russia, where he worked

1Hughes, "Scottsboro Limited," Scottsboro Limited.

2Ibid.
for Meshrapom Film on "Black and White," a movie which was never made, and
in Soviet Asia, where he gathered material for various articles which later
appeared in Travel, Asia, The Ladies' Home Journal, and other periodicals.¹
During the following summer he returned to California via Japan, whence he was
deported for having visited Madame Sun Yat Sen in China.²

While in Moscow, Hughes began his volume of short stories, The Ways of
White Folks, which appeared two years after Scottsboro Limited. Although
written while he was engaged in writing Communistic propaganda, the book is
further evidence of the racial aspect pervading the earlier works of Hughes.
Published in 1934 and coming after the 1932 publication which linked Hughes
with the proletarian cause, these fourteen short stories conform but slightly
to left-wing ideology. Instead, with the exception of one, "Father and Son,"
they closely resemble the thematic scheme of his earlier poems characterized
by racialism and primitivism. With the author's usual faculty for variety,
the racial aspects treated in the volume vary from a depiction of servant-
employer associations to interracial sex relationships. "Cora Unashamed,"³
written while Hughes was in Moscow, relates the story of a simple, hard-
working Negro girl who publicly dared to disgrace her white employers by re-
vealing the true cause of their youngest daughter's untimely death. In "One
Christmas Eve" and "Berry" the difficult experiences of the colored employee
produced through thoughtlessness, indifference, and the imposing natures of
white employers are discussed; the former vividly registers the disappointment
and distress of a colored cook who because of her employers' free-spending,

¹See Letter D in Appendix.
²Ibid.
³Ibid.
fails to receive her full week's salary on Christmas Eve; while the latter
is the story of an underpaid Negro worker whose good-nature and unfortunate
color are taken advantage of by white employees in a children's sanatorium,
and who eventually loses his job because of an unavoidable accident. From his
experiences with white people Berry draws the following conclusion, which
gives the book its title:

"Besides, the ways of white folks, I mean some white folks,
is too much for me. I reckon they must be a few good ones, but
most of 'em ain't good—leastwise they don't treat me good.
And Lawd knows, I ain't never done nothin' to 'em, nothin' a-tall."

The indifferent attitude of a sailor towards his child borne by an attractive
mulatto girl is described in "Red-Headed Baby," while "Little Dog" effective-
ly treats the love of a respectable middle-class white spinster for a Negro
janitor, and her subsequent relinquishment of her apartment in order to escape
his magnetic presence. Somewhat unusual is "Mother and Child," the story of
a white woman who hears the son of a Negro field-hand; but conventional is
the resulting hatred of blacks by whites not so openly demonstrated in the
little Ohio town previously. Likewise uncommon, as shown in "A Good Job
Gone," is the ill-fated love of a wealthy New York broker for a Harlem "sugar-
brown." Perhaps the most interesting story in the group dealing with inter-
racial relations is "Home," the moving account of a young Negro violinist who
has just returned to his native town from a successful concert tour of Europe.
He plays at a church benefit to a proud mother and a condescending white
audience, but is later the lynched victim of the town's hoodlums who had upon
his return branded him an "uppity-nigger" because of his education and culture,
and who resented his friendship with Miss Reese, the white high school music
teacher, and the only person in the town who sincerely appreciated the young

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artist's music. "Passing" is based upon an old, much discussed, and over-used theme. It is an apologetic epistle probably dedicated to all Negro mothers of mulatto children who face hurt and humiliation when their light-colored offsprings cross the line to receive the opportunities of American democracy.

The entire book is devoted to an expose of hypocrisy and oppression in various phases of white society; and of special interest is Hughes' satiric treatment of patronizing members of the Nordic race. The break with his own patron may well have been the impetus of the story "The Blues I'm Playing," in which a gifted young Harlem pianist discovers that her preference for the blues over Beethoven and Chopin, and a husband instead of grand concert tours, means a relinquishing of all comforts and luxuries afforded her by a wealthy philanthropic woman. Two Negro servants' indignation is aroused when they learn that two would-be artists employing them consider Negroes primitive, picturesque, and inferior in "Slave on the Block"; while a similar resentment is experienced in "Poor Little Black Fellow" by an aristocratic New England family when the little colored boy, whom they reared as their very own, expresses his hatred for America where black people are "separate, segregated, shut-off...kept away from everybody else," and proposes to a Rumanian girl.

"Rejuvenation Through Joy" is characteristic of Hughes' previous tendency to emphasize primitivism, while the character of Osceola Jones in "The Blues I'm Playing" plainly bespeaks a primitive yearning for the native passions of life. "Rejuvenation Through Joy," one of the longest and weakest of the group, satirizes the American Nordic's indulgence in the primitivistic, and relates the story of a scheming mulatto passing for white who offers wealthy New Yorkers and Bostonians, aristocrats and blue-bloods bored with
life, a "rejuvenation through joy." His lectures and later his organized "Colony of Joy" are planned around a theory that teaches the rebuilding of the mind, body, and soul "by living to the true rhythm of our own age, to music as modern as today, yet old as life, music that the primitive Negroes brought with their drums from Africa to America—that music...known to the vulgar as jazz, but which is so much 'more' than jazz that we know not how to appreciate it; that music which is the Joy of Life." It is here that the author is observed returning to a theme previously a part of his poetry and now satirized in his prose.

But, as was earlier mentioned, the only story of the group which aggressively voices proletarian ideology, to quote Hugh M. Gloster, is "Father and Son," which was used as the basis for Hughes' play, Mulatto. Although its primary concern is with the outcome of a father's encounter with his mulatto child, significant is Hughes' cursory treatment of the sharecropper's difficulties and his dream of the day when the "test-tube of life, crucible of the South, will find the right powder and...never be the same again—the cotton will blaze and the cabins will burn and the chains will be broken and men, all of a sudden, will shake hands, black men and white men, like steel meeting steel!"

Taking an old theme of a Southern white plantation owner and his relations with a young Negro woman who bore him five children, Hughes weaves an exciting tale. When young, illegitimate Bert Lewis comes home after seven years in high school and college in Atlanta, he discovers that his white

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1 Hughes, "Rejuvenation Through Joy," Ibid., p. 70.
2 Hugh M. Gloster, op. cit., p. 290.
3 See Letter A in Appendix.
4 Hughes, "Father and Son," The Ways of White Folks, pp. 221-22.
father's attitude towards him and all Negroes had not altered even minutely. To Colonel Norwood and the majority of Southern "crackers" a Negro should be "docile, and good-natured, and nigger-like, bowing and scraping and treating white folks like they expected to be treated."\(^1\) Bert was not Colonel Norwood's conception of a "nigger." He was tall, handsome, smart, strong, physically and in spirit, and defiant in his determination never to be "a white folk's nigger." The challenging spirit of the Negro son clashed with the scorn of the white father and resulted in a tragic death for both.

This book, Alain Locke says, is "the militant assault on the citadel of Nordicism in full fury."\(^2\) Its bitter, satiric nature shows that the author is laughing at white people— at selfish, brutal, small-town crackers; at big, domineering plantation owners; at well-meaning patrons; at white women weak for black men; and even at the mulatto Negro. It is not genuinely proletarian, but notable phases of "Father and Son" make the minor inclusion of left-wing-ism significant.

The year 1935 saw the compilation of a book called Proletarian Literature in the United States through the combined efforts of Granville Hicks, Michael Gold of The New Masses staff, and several others, and containing a critical introduction by Joseph Freeman, also an editor of the volume. The book included contributions in the field of fiction from such writers as Erskine Caldwell, John Dos Passos, Jack Conroy, and Michael Gold; in poetry from Langston Hughes, Alfred Kreymborg, Charles Henry Newman, Norman Macleod, and Richard Wright; in reportage from Ben Field and Robert Forsythe; in drama from Clifford Odets; and in literary criticism from such writers as Hicks, Gold,

\(^1\) Ibid., p. 219.

and Joshua Kunitz. Publishing these selections of proletarian propaganda in book form, the editors intended that they should, first, continue "an older literary form inspired by the organized movement of the American proletariat"; and second, establish the beginning of an American literature "which will grow in insight and power with the growth of an American working class."¹

Three poems by Langston Hughes, which appeared previously in The New Masses, were printed in the poetry section of the volume. Their theme and tone and the fact that they were included in a book of proletarian literature leave no doubt in the reader's mind as to the position taken by Hughes in the left-wing movement. "Sharecroppers" is a virile and forceful treatment of the tenant-farming evils sketched earlier in The Ways of White Folks. Although this iniquitous system affects both Negroes and whites, Hughes has chosen black men for his characters:

Just a herd of Negroes  
Driven to the field,  
Plowing, planting, hoeing,  
To make the cotton yield.

When the cotton's picked  
And the work is done  
Boss man takes the money  
And we get none.

Leaves us hungry, ragged  
As we were before,  
Year by year goes by  
And we are nothing more

Than a herd of Negroes  
Driven to the field—  
Plowing life away  
To make the cotton yield.²

¹Joseph Freeman's critical introduction to Granville Hicks, et. al., eds., op. cit., p. 28.
²Hughes, "Sharecroppers," Granville Hicks, et. al., op. cit., p. 167.
In "Ballads of Lenin" the author’s characters are more universally selected: Ivan, the Russian peasant; Chico, the American Negro; and Chang, representing the oppressed Chinese people. Lenin of Russia, the late proletarian chief, receives the support of other leaders in various sections and his powerful spirit urges them on to their goal to make the world their room. "Park Bench" is also an ironic thrust at the wealthy Park Avenue dwellers who gain their riches through the toil and sweat of depraved workers:

I live on a park bench.
You, Park Avenue.
Hell of a distance
Between us two.

I beg a dime for dinners—
You got a butler and maid.
But I'm makin' up!
Say ain't you afraid
That I might, just maybe,
In a year or two,
Move on over
To Park Avenue?

That same year a publication entitled Hunger and Revolt: Cartoons included drawings by Jacob Burck based on the famous Scottsboro case. Langston Hughes contributed prose commentaries on each of the cartoons mocking Ku Klux Klan activities and depicting the unjustifiable lot of the Scottsboro boys. The book itself was dedicated to all workers struggling "against hunger and exploitation...and striving for a world in which no one will starve amidst plenty or die to swell the coffers of the profit and war-makers." Hughes spoke of Burck's "contribution to the great future...the workers throughout the

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1 Hughes, "Park Bench," A New Song, p. 12.
world as a portrayal of America today "that chokes the proletarian throat and makes the blood run to the fists that must be increasingly, militantly, clenched to fight the brazen terror that spreads and grows from Alabama to the Pacific, from New York to Texas." He considers the cartoons especially accurate in their picture of the harsh realities of today; the "legally and illegally lynched, beaten, starved, intimidated, and jim-crowed" Negro; and "the marching power of the proletarian future"; and scoffingly remarks, "Let the capitalists, who pay for our oppression, laugh that future off, if they can." After this essay the volume presents eight of Burek's cartoons inspired by the Scottsboro case under such headings as: "Alabama Law," "In Black and White," "They Won't Let Us Die," "The Boys'll Be Around Tonight!" "Clearing His Conscience!" "Pillars of Justice," "The Judge Says He'll Do the Job!" and "They Shall Not Die!" all derisive ridicule against the eight boys' unwarrantable condition. Hughes wrote:

The Negro masses of America are stirring...The poor whites, beaten and starved as well, are stirring....And the black and white masses slowly but surely will put their two strengths together, realizing they face a common foe.

In the fall of 1935, with the inclusion of "Sharecropper," "Ballads of Lenin," and "Park Bench" in Proletarian Literature in the United States and the work in collaboration with Jacob Burck, came the production of Hughes' first drama, Mulatto, whose plot was taken from "Father and Son," the last story in The Ways of White Folks. The production of this play, purely racial in theme and tone at the highwater mark of his left-wing career, again brings

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1 Ibid.
2 Ibid., p. 1141.
3 Ibid., p. 1142.
to question Hughes' wholehearted belief in proletarian ideology. Despite the fact that the composition of Mulatto was begun in 1929, its production was delayed for five years, possibly because of financial considerations. However, it made a successful run on Broadway and generally attracted favorable criticism from many dramatic critics, though Edith Issacs noted that its effectiveness was destroyed by Hughes' amateurish writing.¹

Radical activities, at this period of Hughes' life, occupied much of his time. In 1937 he was a delegate from the United States to the Second International Writers Congress in Paris. There he spoke on the subject of "Too Much Race," an attack on Fascism as it boldly existed in certain European countries and less openly in the United States. More aware of this condition than the average Negro, Hughes was ably suited to undertake the task before him, and pointed out to the other delegates that American Negroes "have long known in actual practice the meaning of the word Fascism—for the American attitude towards [them] has always been one of economic and social discrimination."² The time has come, he continued, with this adverse condition becoming universal, for the black man and white man to learn the strength of union against discrimination on the basis of poverty and caste. When the force of such a relationship is realized, Fascism, states Hughes, with its terror and oppression, can no longer exist. The Fascists are fighting vigorously an organization of black and white workers through an attack upon its literary advocates, nationally and internationally, because, according to Hughes,

¹ Edith Issacs, "Broadway in Review," Theatre Arts Monthly, XIX (December, 1935), 902.
² Hughes, "Too Much of Race," The Crisis, XLIV (September, 1937), 272.
"...the reactionary and Fascist forces of the world know that writers like Anand and myself, leaders like Herndon, and poets like Guillen and Roumain represent the great longing that is in the hearts of the darker peoples of the world to reach out their hands in friendship and brotherhood to all the white races of the earth. The Fascists know that we long to be rid of hatred and terror and oppression, to be rid of conquering and of being conquered, to be rid of all the ugliness of poverty and imperialism that eat away the heart of life today. We represent the end of race. And the Fascists know that when there is no more race, there will be no more capitalism, and no more war, and no more money for the munition makers, because the workers of the world will have triumphed."¹

The public received, in 1938, a long awaited volume of Hughes' latest poetry under the title of A New Song. Most of the poems included had previously appeared in magazines or newspapers, especially in periodicals voicing Communistic propaganda. The book itself was published by the International Workers Order, a fraternal society serving all American people through a "desire to make available literature which would otherwise be out of the reach of wage earners."² Hughes was the author chosen by the I.W.O. to begin a series of pamphlets that would aid in their determination "to foster culture, and establish cultural ties between people of various races and nationalities."³ The introduction was written by Michael Gold of The New Masses staff.

A New Song is composed of seventeen poems carrying the message, Gold informs us, that Negro and white workers are brothers in suffering and struggle, thereby propagandizing the racial unity advocated by proletarian organizations. The poems as a whole are directed to the American people, giving them a true picture of existing conditions today and expressing the

¹Ibid.
²Hughes, "Foreword," A New Song.
³Quoted from Michael Gold's Introduction to Hughes' A New Song, p. 8.
opinions of the working-class. They make a fervent plea to all Americans to

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.

... 

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.

...

O, let this land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free
Equality is in the air we breathe.

More individual is its request of all the Southern white workers--

Miners,
Farmers,
Mechanics,
Mill hands,
Shop girls,
Railway men,
Servants,
Tobacco workers,
Sharecroppers,

... 

to forget the age-old teachings of Booker T. Washington to remain "separate
as the fingers," and instead consider a union with the black worker in which
all may become

One single hand
That can united rise
To smash the old dead dogmas of the past--
To kill the lies of color
That keep the rich enthroned
And drive us to the time-clock and plow
Helpless, stupid, scattered, and alone--as now--
Race against race,
Because one is black
Another white of face.

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1 Hughes, "Let America Be America Again," Ibid., p. 9.
2 Hughes, "Open Letter to the South," Ibid., p. 27.
Let union be
The force that breaks the time-clock,
Smashes misery,
Takes land,
Takes factories,
Takes office towers,
Takes tools and banks and mines,
Railroads, ships and dams,
Until the forces of the world
Are ours.¹

Perhaps one of the most powerful poems in the group is "Kids Who Die," written especially for young boys and girls weary of selfish living, segregation, race prejudice, hatred, humiliation, and most of all, of poverty and misery to be endured by many while some fortunate ones enjoy the democratic way of life.

This is for the kids who die,
Black and white,
For kids will die certainly.

...  
Kids will die in the swamps of Mississippi
Organizing sharecroppers.
Kids will die in the streets of Chicago
Organizing workers.
Kids will die in the orange groves of California
Telling others to get together.
Whites and Filipinos,
Negroes and Mexicans
All kinds of kids will die
Who don't believe in lies, and bribes, and contentment,
And a lousy peace.

Listen, kids who die—
Maybe, now, there will be no monument for you
Except in our hearts.

...  
But the day will come—
You are sure yourself that it is coming—
When the marching feet of the masses
Will raise for a living monument of love,
And joy, and laughter,
And black hands and white hands clasped as one,
And a song that reaches the sky—
The song of the new life triumphant
Through the kids who die.²

¹Ibid., pp. 27-28.
The "Ballads of Lenin" and "Songs of Spain," the latter probably based upon the author's first-hand experiences as a reporter for The Afro-American during the Spanish Civil War,1 were directed to workers of Russian and Spanish countries. Individual tributes are found in "Ballad of Ozie Powell," and "Chant for Tom Mooney," the former inspired by the cold-blooded murder of a young Negro boy in Alabama by the Sheriff of that county. "Chant for Tom Mooney" is more proletarian in its intent. It was written in honor of a man arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1916 on charges of which, it was later proved, he was entirely innocent, because his activities in labor strikes aroused the hatred of powerful corporations who conspired against him and gained his conviction. These last two poems are examples of race hatred and the new spirit of the masses in organizing themselves against the exploiters of the working classes. First published in Opportunity for 1933, "A New Song," which gives the volume its title, is an account of the Negro's rise from an unschooled, slaving, lynchers' victim to a citizen demanding and ready to receive his rightful share in the bounties of life. In his awakening, he is no longer the servant, humble and complacent, but has developed into a new, self-dependent individual who plays a vital role in the new fight for freedom. Now he scorns his exploiters and defiantly joins hands with the proletariat, firm in his belief that the worker's world, resulting from a union of black and white, holds a new dream, a new way of life. Especially indicative of Hughes' unquestionable change from caste to class propaganda is the alteration of the original poem to the 1931 version. In 1933, Hughes states in "A New Song" that "before the darker world the future lies."2 But

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1 See Letter D in Appendix.

in 1938, the proletarian propagandist writes not of the darker world, but of "the black and white world— the worker's world"¹ which will combine to form a union to surpass all unions, to withstand the destructive forces brought to power by their enemies—the capitalist and the exploiter.

In the summer of 1938 Hughes again went abroad as a joint delegate with Theodore Dreiser from the League of American Writers to Lord Cecil's Peace Conference in Paris and, while in this metropolis, contributed articles to French magazines.² The latter part of the year found him at work on the script of Way Down South, a motion picture, and a revision of Cullen and Bontemps' St. Louis Woman, which was nearing production by the Federal Theatre when the project was suddenly closed.³

Until the publication of his autobiography in 1940 Hughes published no other book. But after the success of Mulatto his work in drama increased. As a Guggenheim fellow, for example, he teamed with William Grant Still and wrote the libretto of Troubled Island, an opera based on a play of the same name performed by both the Gilpin Players and the Roxanne Players.⁴ Collaborating for the second time with Arna Bontemps, he made an attempt at satiric farce in a play called When the Jack Hollers, presented also by the Gilpin Players in 1936. The same year in which A New Song made its public appearance, there were two additional attempts in the dramatic field— "Soul Gone Home," included in Contemporary One-Act Plays, edited by William Koslenko, and Don't You Want to be Free, the former written in prose, and the latter a poetic play.

¹ Hughes, "A New Song," A New Song, p. 25.
² See Letter D in Appendix.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
presented at the Suitcase Theater in Harlem and also over the radio. Soul Gone Home, falling into the farcical and satiric vein begun in When the Jack Hollers, is the story of a young Negro boy. In the opening scene his mother is shown bemoaning the death of her son and begging him to return from the "spirit-world" to speak to her. The dead boy completely surprises his mother by speaking and proceeds to express his feelings towards her for bringing him into the world fatherless and afterwards not providing for him in his early youth. The play ends with the undertakers removing the body and the woman, who half an hour previously would have been pitied in her grief, wiping away all traces of tears with powder and rouge and going into the red-light district to ply her sordid trade. Readers are not so much moved by the contempt the dead boy holds for his mother or the ironic climax of the play as they are by the author's effort to picture effectively some conditions existing among the poorer classes as a result of poverty.

Perhaps, the strongest work in this later period exposing the evils of sharecropping and the cruel punishment endured by young and old objectors to such conditions is Don't You Want to Be Free, which, according to Hughes in a letter to his writer, "ran 135 performances in Harlem, record for any play to date--1938." The drama is constructed around a thin plot which follows the experiences of the Negro from Africa to America. Very vividly are depicted the suffering and hardship which the Negro endures in the American social order, particularly in the South, where sharecropping, miscegenation, and lynching are the major evils. In the play Hughes gives unmistakable evidence of his belief that the salvation of the Negro will come only when the oppressed members of both groups in the South form a coalition against their exploiters

1 See Letter D in Appendix.
and persecutors. Interspersed throughout the piece are lyrics from Hughes' earlier volumes; and free employment is made of spirituals, blues, work songs, and jazz. Don't You Want to be Free, though weak in terms of dramatic craftsmanship, is an addition to the list of left-wing works produced by Hughes during the 1930's.

The Front Porch, written in 1939 and presented in the Karamu Theatre, is a three-act drama treating labor, and another effort in the author's proletarian activities. Although it was more serious in intent than any other of Hughes' dramatic attempts, it lacked the power and efficacy which characterize Mulatto and Don't You Want to be Free. Consequently, it did not experience their success, but it is nevertheless an addition to the author's works in the left-wing tradition.

During the summer of the following year Hughes wrote two shows for the National Negro Exposition in Chicago and thereafter went to Hollywood under the auspices of the Hollywood Theatre Alliance to work on a Negro musical revue which was never produced. After writing a sketch for Duke Ellington's Jump for Joy, he went East to lecture and to write De Sun Do Move (1942), the opening play of the Skyloft Players of the Parkway Community House in Chicago. Presented with a cast of about fifty players, including the chorus and dancers, and enacted on a bare stage, De Sun Do Move opens on a New Orleans dock as a slave ship drops anchor in the harbor. The year is about 1800. Rock, the hero of the story, is separated from his wife Mary and son after all three are sold into slavery. Though tortured and narrowly escaping death several times, Rock eventually locates Mary, only to learn that his boy is no longer alive.

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1Ibid.
2Ibid.
However, through the organized efforts of the "underground railroad" these two manage to flee into the North, where Rock joins the Union Army. Through Rock the author portrays man's instinctive love of freedom and his eagerness to participate in the liberation of others reduced to involuntary servitude.

Almost simultaneous with the turn of the 1920's to the 1930's, therefore, came a transition in Hughes from "poète de la race" to "poète de la classe." After writing "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria," which caused the break with his wealthy patron, the author became an ardent supporter of movements and organizations fighting for the proletariat. With the composition of The Front Porch in 1939, Hughes' literary career as the proletarian propagandist seems to fade, and De Sun Do Move in 1942 illustrates the author's return to a former theme, racialism. His latest published volumes have been an autobiography, The Big Sea (1940), most of which was written during the summer of 1938 at the Grand Hotel in Chicago and completed in the following year on a farm in Carmel Valley, California, and a book of light verse entitled Shakespeare in Harlem (1942), peculiarly reminiscent of The Weary Blues but definitely inferior to this initial volume.

In an introduction to The Weary Blues, Carl Van Vechten wrote of his desire to see Hughes record in writing something of the adventurous life he had led, especially, he said, "before so much more befalls him that he may find it difficult to recapture all the salient episodes within the limits of a single volume." In 1940, thirteen years later, The Big Sea was presented to Hughes' international reading public. This autobiographical account of the poet's life is a treasure-chest of information concerning the author, his

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1 Ibid.
2 Introduction to Hughes' The Weary Blues, p. 9.
dreams, his interests, his life, and the people he knew. But the greatest value of the book, perhaps, lies in its revelation of intimate details concerning the Negro Renaissance. Students will find the book invaluable for an intensive study of this era. Notwithstanding, it is Hughes' life account--from his birth to the unforgettable depression years which brought him, among other things, a separation from his patron--his life as a little boy in a Middle-Western town; the incidents shaping his development; his father's indifference to him and his grave dislike of that parent; his mother's nonchalant existence; his schooling; his varied occupations; his adventurous years abroad; the real beginning of his literary fame; his literary acquaintances; and the life he led in the company and at the expense of his patron. Colorful are the various incidents and encounters themselves; but the author's natural talent for vivid detail makes the book more real and, consequently, more interesting. Excerpts from poems and blues lend it something of the novel arrangement of *Not Without Laughter*.

Of special interest to the student of Hughes' writings is the manner in which the author discreetly reveals his ideas and attitudes concerning racial problems today. He does not stoop to a subjective characterization of whites or Negroes, and although his presentation is frank, his allusions to incidents involving either race are decidedly objective. Hence, there is little danger in labeling him a race propagandist in this book. In reference to this feature, Oswald Villard has written:

...He is not a propagandist, nor a too bitter critic. When he records some of the discriminations from which he has suffered and insults to which he has been subjected he does so almost like an outsider looking in. You feel also that he is not holding something back as so many colored people do when setting forth their views where they may be seen or heard by white folks. More than that, he is as severe in his criticisms of the snobbish colored intellectuals, notably of Washington, as he is of the
condescending, race proud whites.\footnote{Oswald Villard, "The Negro Intellectual," The Saturday Review of Literature, XXII (August, 1940), 12.}

It is this combined quality of tact and forcefulness that adds to the genuineness of the book. While at Lincoln he attended an interracial conference being held at Franklin and Marshall College, which, he noted, barred Negro students. In \textit{The Big Sea} Hughes describes the meeting and its outcome simply and without rancor, and yet the irony of holding an interracial session at a segregated school is felt by the reader. This is one of the discriminations Villard has reference to when he says Hughes records them "almost like an outsider looking in."

Although the book is one of average length, the reader perhaps regrets that its narrative does not include the depression years.\footnote{Hughes is now at work on a sequel to \textit{The Big Sea}. In a letter to this writer, he states:}

During these years, Hughes' life was just as interesting, if not so adventurous, as during the previous ones. His transition from a poet of race to a class propagandist is of vital interest to his public. Attending conferences in behalf of the American working-class, affiliating himself with \textit{The New Masses}, and representing Negro workers in the International Workers Organization's effort to "foster culture, and establish cultural ties between people of various races and nationalities," Hughes has encountered people and places and affairs as varied and interesting as many of those in his earlier life.

Yet, despite the fact that it covers only three decades of his life, \textit{The Big Sea} is enough to reveal the man's personality—a "charitable spirit,"

The Big Sea will eventually be followed by a companion volume covering the years from 1930. Because it will be more serious in tone, treating of Negro problems around the world, of the Soviet Union, Spain during the Civil War, Hollywood, etc., I closed what I considered the formative period of my work by ending \textit{The Big Sea} where I did. See Letter D in Appendix.
says Henry Lee Moon, "unembittered by experience, gifted with a leavening sense of humor, and sensitive alike to beauty and human suffering." It is revelatory of "a genial quality about his candor which contrasts sharply with the mordant and memorable characterizations in Mr. McKay's autobiography, A Long Way from Home," carrying nothing of "the chaste restraint of Along This Way, James Weldon Johnson's life story." The style, in fact, is typically Hughes', not an original one, but one which encompasses a simplicity often discernible in his prose that some reviewers have termed "Biblical."

This volume comes in the prime years of Hughes' life. Autobiographies are usually a definite indication of a decline in the writer's career. They mark a growth in experience and in years, and imply self-satisfaction on the part of the author. They show, too, "the waning of an author's creative powers...a decline of his sense of objectivity and a turning inward of the spirit." A critical examination of the nature of those poems included in his latest volume, Shakespeare in Harlem (1942), will reveal evidence of such a transition in the literary career of Langston Hughes. The selections in this "book of light verse" carry nothing of the beauty, thought, and impassioned utterance that are often the qualities of his earlier compositions. Seemingly, the author has lost something of his keen insight and apprehension, for the flashy, gaudy air of indiscretion pervading this latest work results in poems vulgar, unwholesome, and degenerate—without variety or any hint of artistic value; hence, they mark a great decline from the success achieved by certain poems in The Weary Blues and Fine Clothes to the Jew. At the close

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1 Henry Lee Moon, Review of Hughes: The Big Sea, Opportunity, XVIII (October, 1940), 312.
2 Ibid.
3 Theophilus Lewis, "Adventurous Life," The Crisis, XLVII (December, 1940), 394.
of his autobiography Hughes wrote: "Literature is a big sea full of many fish. I let down my nets and pulled. I'm still pulling." When in 1940, Henry Lee Moon, in reviewing the publication, considered the author's past achievements and the fact that he was entering the prime years of his life, he predicted noteworthy future accomplishments, saying Hughes might "well look forward to the rich rewards of many another fishing season." Unfortunately, however, Shakespeare in Harlem is a bad catch from the big sea in which Hughes is still fishing.

1Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 335.

2Henry Lee Moon, Review of Hughes' The Big Sea, op. cit., 312.
The advance of Negro literature has been signally great, and the future promises even superior accomplishments, for the Negro artist now realizes that his race as a minority group has much to offer American culture. However, the student of this literature is not to be unmindful of its imperfections and deficiencies. While the younger Negro generation has looked with contempt upon old stereotyped Negro characters such as the Uncle Tom, the plantation mammy, and the gay and carefree individual, they have often been unaware of their inclination toward the creation of another stock type—the common street lounger, the prostitute, the dwellers of the slums, the gambler, and the roustabout—who are in actuality no better than the others. These shortcomings, however, have been counterbalanced by some real gains. Disregard for the conventional poetic forms has played an important part in the era's break from the sentimental, didactic, and optimistic literature of the previous age; and, more important to the Negro literary world are these evident advances: a growing sense of freedom that has come to the Negro author, an increasing open-mindedness of publishers, and a gradual abandonment of the Harlem obsession for Southern characters and scenes which offer a wider artistic horizon. Moreover, the spirit of experimentation which was abroad in this era was wholeheartedly followed by the Negro artist who has brought to the front new poetic patterns that have contributed considerably to an enriched literary expression. However, the most significant advancement made by recent Negro literature lies, perhaps, in the effect it has had upon the general cultural development of the race. The Negro reading public is larger, reading materials cover a wider range of thoughts and emotions and are thereby more adaptable to the average individual, and the number of books
written and published has been increased greatly.

This sudden but well-earned rise in the quality of Negro literature is not so surprising as it may seem at first glance; for, as Brawley has said, the greatest literature comes from the race or nation that has "lived most, felt most, suffered most."\(^1\) Certainly the Negro as a race has shared abundantly in these. Its struggles, aspirations, yearnings, and earnest strivings are a moving story, a story that can enrich American art immeasurably.

Langston Hughes has figured prominently in the growth of Negro literature. His active literary career began with The Weary Blues (1926), a volume of verse written in the characteristic style of the new Negro generation—a style realistic, impressionistic, and typical of the writers who abandoned idealism and self-preening for primitivism and self-revelation. A year after this publication came Fine Clothes to the Jew (1927), a compilation of verse which, though artistically inferior to The Weary Blues, nevertheless contains noteworthy experiments in the appropriation of jazz, the blues, and the shout to the purposes of poetry. In 1930 appeared Not Without Laughter, a novel that caused Hughes to be ranked among those poets who had successfully turned from the poetic to the prose medium. During the 1930's Hughes once more demonstrated the versatility of his talents. In addition to producing several additional volumes of verse—including Dear Lovely Death (1931), The Dream-keeper and Other Poems (1932), and A New Song (1938)—he compiled a book of short stories under the title of The Ways of White Folks (1934). His most active work during the 1930's, however, was done in drama. In 1931 appeared The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations, which was followed by Scotts-boro Limited; Four Poems and a Play in Verse (1932). His most successful dramas

\(^1\) Benjamin Brawley, "The Promise of Negro Literature," The Journal of Negro History, XIX (January, 1934), 57.
were *Mulatto* (1935), *Don't You Want to be Free* (1938), and *Soul Gone Home* (1938). Other plays appearing in the latter half of the decade were *Troubled Island* and *Joy to My Soul*. The Front Porch was produced in 1939, and *De Sun Do Move* in 1942. In the interim, Hughes was busily engaged in other capacities—as a lecturer traveling the North American continent, visiting various schools, colleges, and organizations; as a delegate to the Second International Writers Congress in 1937; as an overseas reporter during the Spanish Civil War; as a newspaper correspondent in Asia; as a motion picture script writer in Russia and in Hollywood; as a collaborator in musical and dramatic productions; and as the author of articles contributed to magazines and newspapers. The *Big Sea*, his autobiography, appeared in 1940, covering twenty-eight years of his life and the formative period of his literary career. At present he is at work on a sequel to this volume which will begin with his activities in the 1930's and treat Negro problems around the world.

The writings of Langston Hughes contain three major themes. First, and foremost, is that subject matter which is mainly racial in character and self-consciously revolts against race prejudice, exploitation, and injustice, and the effects of these handicaps upon the Negro's spirit; second, the proletarian material that sanctions and supports Communist propaganda, and is demonstrative of the author's belief in the left-wing doctrines current in the 1930's; third, the work done in the early twenties expressive of the primitivism so freely followed by artists, writers, and critics of that period. Of the three, primitivism was least favorably accepted by Negro critics and readers. But inasmuch as the primitivistic emphasis—the tendency toward "the worship of animalism for its own sake" and towards "a kind of

Romanticism in which the reader is led to believe that the low-brow is a
good fellow and that impulses are more to be trusted than ideas—received
the attention and following of the classes as well as of the literati, it is
inevitable that such an inclination in Hughes, ever sensitive to current
trends and thoughts, would be unavoidable. Chronologically, there is no
definite line of demarcation separating Hughes' use of each theme. While the
dominate note of The Weary Blues (1926) is racialism and primitivism, and the
emphasis in A New Song (1938) is upon radicalism and proletarianism, several
intervening volumes show a fusion of these two. Especially is this inter-
mixture observable in Fine Clothes to the Jew (1927) and The Ways of White
Folks (1934). The year 1930, however, distinctly marks the transition in
Hughes' career from works mainly racial in theme to activities and writings
demonstrating class-consciousness.

J. Saunders Redding describes Hughes as a Negro divinely capable of
realizing (which is distinctive) and giving expression to (which is cultivated)
the dark perturbation of the soul of the Negro. These two characteristics
have combined to produce pathos, color, and distinctiveness in the works of a
man who knows, feels, and understands his subject. Always Hughes' concern
has been with the lower classes. Their lives to him are lavishly yielding
of materials for intense and emotional writing. In order to express their
emotions effectively, he designed poetic patterns peculiarly suited to this
purpose. The blues, the shout, and the incorporation of jazz rhythms in
poetry are all significant contributions made by this author, not only to

\[1\text{Ibid., pp. 397-98.}\]

\[2\text{J. Saunders Redding, op. cit., p. 115.}\]
Negro literature, but to American literature as a whole. Carl Van Vechten found the employment of Hughes' blues especially useful in *Nigger Heaven* (1927), his novel of Harlem life, and young Negro writers appear greatly susceptible to these new poetic mediums. In the use of these forms, however, Hughes has often been very lax in poetic discipline, a practice that has evoked severe censure from some critics. Previously, the instinctive precision that is his in fusing folk rhythms into his poetry has outweighed any tendency to be too informal. But in his latest publication, *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942), Brawley's early accusation of vulgarity and unconventionalism in Hughes seems justifiable. Here the author reverts to the blues and jazz mediums which he had temporarily abandoned for a style more befitting his work in proletarian propaganda. In the reversion his emphasis has been upon sex and love in its lowest form; his blues poems have maintained their humor, but no longer are they wholesome exhibitions of the singer's devil-may-care attitude. The varying themes are lacking, and these blues are despondent reflections of love betrayals alone. In the jazz poems can be seen nothing of the overtone of sadness that was so easily discernible in the lyrics of *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes to the Jew*. No longer are they expressions of the Negro's reaction to his intolerable place in an alien and unfriendly society, but seem to show that certain dark folk have turned a deaf ear and a blind eye to existing conditions that once disturbed them, and are content to concern themselves with their own degenerate living.

Hughes' greatest contribution, however, does not lie in his original poetic expression. More noteworthy, perhaps, is the influence his treatment of the thoughts and emotions of a lowly people has had upon other artists following the new Negro generation. Much has been written by Negro and white authors that shows a change of attitude and method in the use of Negro
characters and materials. This new approach largely came about as a result of the efforts of Hughes and others to represent the true American Negro and to break down those stereotyped characters and themes that prevailed in earlier literature.

Unquestionable is the fact that the forty years or more of Langston Hughes' existence have been ones of rich and varied living. Life for him "ain't been no crystal stair." At birth the odds were against him, and he early realized that his individual progress would depend to a large degree upon his own efforts. Consequently, one is not surprised that he dieted on rice and hot dogs in order to see himself through the junior year of high school. He had learned at an early age to work for himself. His travels abroad, and, upon his return to the United States, his tour of the South were fruitful experiences of his own making. The discovery of his poetic talent by Vachel Lindsay was the result of an impulsive gesture on Hughes' part. And many of the eventful occurrences of his career did not just happen to him, but received their impetus from the author himself. His life has been an exciting and often dramatic one, giving him a rich and full store of experiences from which to draw the many themes that pervade his works. Sensitive and emotional, he has always been keenly concerned about conditions in the world. At first, his interest was centered mainly upon the racial problems of the American Negro. Later he drifted into the broader channels of proletarian ideology. Feeling that better race relations could be brought about through the combined efforts of the poorer working classes, Hughes became a left-wing propagandist. His fame as a writer has left his generous nature unaltered. In fact, he has been recently called "The Crusader" because of the unselfish way in which he offers whatever assistance he is able to give young aspiring writers. By nature he is reticent and retiring, but
as a writer he usually gives a frank, candid, unreserved presentation of his subject matter.

Still a comparatively young man, Hughes should be producing creative writing that would surpass his previous efforts. Instead, however, he has seemingly reached a peak in original expression. The themes of his lyric verse have ceased to be as rich and as varied as heretofore and have therefore lost much of their original charm; and, despite his continued attempts at poeticizing, his recent verse is notably inferior. As a novelist Hughes probably will never achieve great success. Lengthy prose does not offer him the proper outlet for his spontaneous emotions. The short story and the drama, however, are much more effective mediums for the gusto and enthusiasm that are characteristically a part of his personality, but in the latter form he has not been too successful, although during the 1930's he neglected poetry and fiction for work in the dramatic field. His more recent success has been achieved in lecturing, a field in which Hughes seems much at home; and it is the opinion of the writer that his future activities will center around this phase of work. Nevertheless, his place in Negro literature will always be one respected by the public and appreciated by other writers, for his subjects are of worldwide interest and his method of expression is frequently copied by many young authors.
63.5 St. Nicholas Avenue,  
New York, New York,  
January 9, 1943.

Dear Miss Pinkston,

Your letter I found waiting for me on my recent return from a lecture tour of the Middle West. I am sorry I have no material on hand I could send you, except the enclosed biographical notes, as I have for the past several months been giving all my manuscripts, plays, anthologies, etc. to the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection at Yale. MULATTO as a play was never published, and the original script is at Yale. It was taken, however, from the last story in THE WAYS OF WHITE FOLKS, in case you would wish to refer to that. I am sorry I cannot be more helpful, but I wish you the best of luck in your study.

Sincerely yours,

(Signed) Langston Hughes
My Career as a Writer

I began to write verse in high school and became a member of the staff of our magazine and the editor of the Year Book upon graduation (Central High School, Cleveland, Ohio, '20). My first poem to be published in a nationally known magazine appeared in the CRISIS in 1921. It was called "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." In 1925 I received the first award for poetry from the OPPORTUNITY MAGAZINE prize contest, the winning poem being "The Weary Blues." Since then I have also received awards from POETRY, PALMS, and the CRISIS for various poems. In 1925 Vachel Lindsay read three of my poems on his own program in the Little Theatre of the Wardman Park Hotel in Washington where I was working as a bus boy. In 1926 my first book of poetry appeared, in 1927 another and in 1930 my first novel, "Not Without Laughter"; in 1932 a selection of poems for young people, and a child's book about Haiti in collaboration with Arna Bontemps; and in 1934, a collection of short stories. On October 24, 1935, my first play, "MULATTO," was produced at the Vanderbilt Theatre in New York and ran for eleven months on Broadway.

I have written, as well, during these years, a large number of articles, poems, and stories that, so far, have not appeared in book form. Many of my poems and some of my articles and stories have been translated into German, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and Dutch, in newspapers and magazines abroad. And my novel has been published in England, Russia, and France, in book form and serially in WEN YI, a Chinese literary magazine. For this book, "Not Without Laughter," I was given the Harmon Gold Award for literature in 1931, a medal and $1000.00.

My writing has been largely concerned with the depicting of Negro life in America, and much of my work appeared in Negro magazines and newspapers. I have made a number of translations of the poems of Negro writers in Cuba and Haiti. In 1931-1932 I lectured throughout the South at the Negro schools and colleges there, and one of my main interests is the encouragement of literary ability among colored writers and the development of American Negro Literature insofar as I can aid in its development. In 1933 I was invited to assist in the preparation of a scenario for a Negro motion picture to be made in Moscow. The winter of 1934 I spent in Mexico, where I translated a number of Mexican and Cuban stories. In 1935 I was granted a Guggenheim Fellowship for creative work.

For further biographical information see LIVING AUTHORS, WHO'S WHO; AMERICA'S YOUNG MEN, PORTRAITS IN COLOR by Mary White Ovington; or the introduction by Carl Van Vechten to my first book of poems, "The Weary Blues."
LANGSTON HUGHES

BOOKS

THE WEARY BLUES, poems, Knopf, 1926
FINE CLOTHES TO THE JEW, poems, Knopf, 1927
NOT WITHOUT LAUGHTER, novel, Knopf, New York and London, 1930; Gihel, Moscow, 1933; Rider, Paris, 1934
THE DREAM KEEPER, selected poems, Knopf, 1932
POPO AND FIFINA, child's story of Haiti written in collaboration with Arna Bontemps, Macmillan, 1932
THE WAYS OF WHITE FOLKS, stories, Knopf, New York; Allyn and Unwin, London, 1934
THE BIG SEA, autobiography, Knopf, 1940
SHAKESPEARE IN HARLEM, poems, Knopf, 1942

BOOKLETS

DEAR LOVELY DEATH, poems, Privately printed, 1931
THE NEGRO MOTHER, recitations, Golden Stair Press, 1931
SCOTTSBORO LIMITED, a play and four poems, Golden Stair Press, 1932

CONTRIBUTED POEMS OR ARTICLES TO


MULATTO, first play, produced at the Vanderbilt Theatre, New York, October 21, 1935, with Rose McClendon in the leading role. Other plays include Troubled Island, and Joy to My Soul done in Cleveland by the Gilpin Players. Also, "Don't you Want to be Free," and "The Sun Do Move."

SONGS

"Four Negro Songs," John Alden Carpenter; "Breath of A Rose," William Grant Still; "Sea Charm," Edward Harris, and others by Burleigh, Handy, etc.

AWARDS

Opportunity Poetry Prize, 1925; Palms Intercollegiate Poetry Award, 1927; Harmon Award of Literature, 1931; selected by Dr. Charles Austin Beard in 1934 as one of America's twenty-five "most interesting" personages with a "socially conscious" attitude. A Guggenheim Fellowship, 1935. Rosenwald Fellowship, 1940.
LANGSTON HUGHES
CURRENT BIOGRAPHICAL MATERIAL 1943

WAR ACTIVITIES: Member of the Advisory Committee of the WRITERS WAR BOARD;
Member of the LIDICE LIVES COMMITTEE; Under the auspices of the P.E.N. Club and coordinator of American Affairs has broadcasted his poetry to Latin America in both Spanish and Portuguese.

CURRENT MAGAZINE MATERIAL: A poem THE BITTER RIVER in the current issue of THE NEGRO QUARTERLY; an article, WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE SOUTH in the current issue of COMMON GROUND.

SONGS: During the fall of 1942 the following songs with lyrics of Langston Hughes have been published: THE NEGRO SPEAKS OF RIVERS, music by Margaret Bonds; GO AND GET THE ENEMY BLUES, music by W. C. Handy and Clarence M. Jones; FREEDOM ROAD, music by Emerson Harper; NEW WIND ABOLOWIN', music by Elie Siegmeister. The song FREEDOM ROAD was introduced on March of Time, by Lynn Murray's Chorus and Mark Warnow's orchestra, and has also been featured on the Treasury Star Parade.

LECTURE TOUR: During November and December and January of 1943 Langston Hughes is engaged in a lecture tour from New York City as far West as Kansas, reading his poems before college groups, Civic, literary, and church organizations.

RADIO: A Langston Hughes radio script, BROTHERS, has been chosen by the WRITERS WAR BOARD as a War Script of the Month and distributed throughout the country to local radio stations and educational radio groups.

MOTION PICTURES: Irving Mills has recently contracted for two Langston Hughes songs to be used in an all-Negro musical extravaganza to go before the cameras at the Fox Studios in January.
Miss Gaynelle Barksdale, Reference Librarian,
Atlanta University Library
273 Chestnut Street
Atlanta, Georgia

Dear Miss Barksdale,

I regret to state that I cannot at this time give you a complete list of the Langston Hughes manuscripts in the Yale Library. It will require weeks of careful examination to identify and list the manuscripts. A general statement is as follows:

One box of miscellaneous manuscripts.
"Not Without Laughter" (3 boxes of manuscripts)
Plays (3 boxes)
Plays, broadcasts and cinema (1 box)
Alterations appearing in Seventh edition of Nigger Heaven (Langston Hughes & Carl Van Vechten, 1 box)
Many miscellaneous letters, etc.

Yours very truly,

(Signed) Anne S. Pratt
Reference Librarian.
April 1, 1943

Miss Annette Pinkston
Box 51
Atlanta University
Atlanta, Georgia

Dear Miss Pinkston:

Please forgive my long delay in answering your letter, but I have been out of town on lecture tours and quite busy.

In answer to your question as to why I gave all of my manuscripts and other material of historical interest to the James Weldon Johnson Collection at Yale University, the simple reason is that Yale has been, up to this year, the only university or library other than the University of Buffalo, to express to me any interest whatsoever in contemporary Negro manuscripts. I have never had any such requests from Howard, Hampton or the Schomburg Collection and only very recently did a letter come from Wallace Van Jackson of the Atlanta University Library, I am sure, as a result of your interest in Negro manuscripts.

The James Weldon Johnson Collection at Yale is, I think, already the finest collection of contemporary Negro manuscripts in existence. They have excellent bomb-proof vaults for preserving the material and fine facilities for cataloging and displaying. The Yale Collection is open to everyone and when it is officially inaugurated after the war, they plan to have a week of cultural festivities devoted to Negro Arts and Letters.

I assure you, had any Negro Collection asked for my manuscripts first, I would have been happy to let them have them. On the other hand, the inter-racial value of such a collection being at Yale is, I think, inestimable.

With best regards, I am

Sincerely yours,

(Signed) Langston Hughes

LH; IC
LETTER D

Parkway Community House,
5120 South Parkway,
Chicago, Illinois,
April 21, 1943.

Dear Miss Pinkston,

Your letter has just reached me here as I am passing through on lecture tour. Had a wonderful week-end in Toronto speaking there, most interesting Negro group.

In answer to your questions:

1. I do not care to disclose the name of the patron mentioned in THE BIG SEA.

2. THE BIG SEA will eventually be followed by a companion volume covering the years from 1930. Because it will be more serious in tone, treating of Negro problems around the world, of the Soviet Union, Spain during the Civil War, Hollywood, etc., I closed what I considered the formative period of my work by ending THE BIG SEA where I did.

3. From 1930 on I do not know of any written record of my work, but I will give you here as much information as I can remember on a crowded day between lectures; Summer in Haiti. 1931-32 lecture tour of the country by car from New York through the South. Wrote Popo and Fifina with Bontemps at Christmas. Up to Seattle, 9 months. Summer 1932 to Russia to work for Meshram Film on a picture BLACK AND WHITE, that was never made; to Soviet Asia as a newspaper correspondent, various articles later appearing on the subject in TRAVEL, ASIA, LADIES HOME JOURNAL, etc. First short stories, CORA UNASHAMED, etc. written in Moscow. Summer 1933 to California via Toyo and Shanghai. Deported from Japan for having visited Madame Sun Yat Sen in China. Lived a year or so at Carmel writing short stories and poems. MULATTO produced in New York, various other plays by Gilpin Players, 1935-36-37-38. Wrote libretto of opera on Guggenheim Fellowship with William Grant Still in Los Angeles, TROUBLED ISLAND, based on play of same name as performed by the Gilpins and the Roxanne Players of Detroit. Lived couple of years in Oberlin and Cleveland, 1936-37, I think, maybe '38. Thence to Spain as reporter for the BALTIMORE AFRO AMERICAN during the Civil War. Several months in Madrid under siege and at front with International Brigade. Home to New York to write and produce DON'T YOU WANT TO BE FREE which ran 135 performances in Harlem, record for any play to date--this in 1938. Return to Paris that summer for Lord Cecil's World Peace Conference, joint delegate with Theodore Dreiser from League of American Writers. Wrote some articles for Paris magazines and papers. Home in October for New England lecture tour and to Hollywood to work on script of motion picture, WAY DOWN SOUTH. Also revised there ST. LOUIS WOMAN by Cullen & Bontemps, making a musical version for Federal Theatre, on verge of production when project closed down. East for lectures. Return to California to write BIG SEA on farm in Carmel Valley, or rather to
complete it, mostly written preceding summer in Grand Hotel in Chicago. Wrote two shows for National Negro Exposition in Chicago summer of '10 I believe. To Hollywood to work on Negro musical revue for Hollywood Theatre Alliance, never produced. One sketch in Duke Ellington's JUMP FOR JOY. Put together poems for SHAKESPEARE IN HARLEM. East to lecture and to write opening play of the Skyloft Players, at this Community Center. The play, DE SUN DO MOVE, which may now be secured in mimeographed form from the I.W.O. Educational Dept., 80 Fifth Avenue, New York, ($1.00), produced in Chicago for 12 performances, April, 1942. East for summer at Yado working on second volume of BIG SEA, song lyrics, poems. Fall 1942, lecture tour as far west as Kansas. Winter, 42-43, poetry for ANP, column HERE TO YONDER for Chicago Defender, various articles, COMMON GROUND, JOURNAL EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY, etc., Radio poem, FREEDOM'S PLOW for Urban League, various poems, etc., and at the moment on lecture tour which includes Wayne University, Detroit, Oberlin, and Pittsburgh College for Women.

Which brings you right up to date. I am enclosing a copy of my newest poem, written just today. The drafts are being sent to Atlanta University Library.

On my return to New York in May I shall be engaged in writing the Madison Square Garden Pageant for the Negro Labor Victory Committee to be performed June 7, FOR THIS WE FIGHT.

I hope to spend the summer working on the second volume of my autobiography if I have the money and don't have to work on a plantation, or go to war.

I trust this will answer all your questions, and that your paper will be a successful one. Dozens of students write me for this sort of information every spring. Naturally, I like to be read, but I hope nobody gets a headache studying me. That wouldn't be fun.

Best to you,

Sincerely,

(Signed) Langston Hughes
DEAR MR. PRESIDENT
by
Langston Hughes

President Roosevelt, you
Are our Commander In Chief.
As such, I appeal
To you for relief.

Respectfully, sir,
I await your reply
As I train here to fight,
Perhaps to die.

I am a soldier
Down in Alabam'
Wearing the uniform
Of Uncle Sam.

But when I get on the bus
I have to ride in the back,
Because
My face is black.

When I get on the train,
It's the Jim Crow car.
That don't seem to go
With why we're fighting this war.

Mr. President, sir,
I don't understand
Democracy
That forgets the black man.

Respectfully, therefore,
I call your attention
To the Jim Crow laws
Your speeches don't mention.

I ask why YOUR soldiers
Must ride in the back,
Segregated
Because we are black?

I train here to fight,
Perhaps to die.
Urgently, sir,
I await your reply.
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