

Name _____ Date _____

Langston Hughes's "Harlem"

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. James Mercer Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, on February 1, 1902. His parents divorced when he was young, and he was raised by his grandmother until he was 13. He was often lonely as a child and spent a lot of time reading. As a teenager, Hughes moved to Lincoln, Illinois, to live with his mother and her husband. He began writing poetry that year. A year later, the family moved to Cleveland, Ohio. Despite all the moving around, Hughes did well in high school and was popular with his fellow students. During his senior year, he was voted class poet and editor of the yearbook.

Notes

2. After graduating from high school, Hughes studied for a year at Columbia University in New York City. He published his first poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," in 1921. Hughes quickly became one of the most important writers of the Harlem Renaissance, the movement of African-American literary, artistic and musical culture in the 1920s. He was the first African American to make a living as a writer. Hughes was known for telling the stories of black Americans in authentic ways. His work reflected the diversity of African Americans' language, relationships, suffering, joy and love of music. He wrote about discrimination in America and how it affected people in his communities. He used simple language and themes that could be understood by anyone who could read.

Notes

3. Hughes was famous for his lyrical writing. He wrote many poems that were influenced by the rhythm of jazz and blues music. He also often used figurative language to emphasize the themes he wrote about. One example of figurative language is simile. In a simile, the writer compares two different things using "like" or "as." In "Harlem," Hughes uses similes to compare "a dream deferred" to several things. Does it dry up "like a raisin in the sun," a juicy fruit that has become dry and shriveled? He wonders if it stinks "like rotten meat" or forms a crust "like a syrupy sweet." Maybe it "sags like a heavy load," becoming a burden on the carrier. These comparisons create vivid images of what an unrealized dream might look like.

Notes

4. In “Harlem,” Hughes uses a rhetorical device called anaphora. Anaphora is the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive sentences, clauses or verses. Repeating the same words adds emphasis to an important idea or theme. It lends a pleasant rhythm to a poem or passage. Writers sometimes use anaphora to help persuade, inspire or motivate their audience. A famous example of anaphora is the first sentence of Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*:

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