Chapter One

The Evolution of the Poet

When Walt Whitman shared the platform for Afro-American literature at the Chicago World Fair on August 25, 1893 with a 21-year-old Ohioan named Paul Laurence Dunbar, no one imagined that it was the inauguration of a new era for the blacks and Afro-American literature. Dunbar was not the first black American to write poetry in the so-called Negro dialect; but he was the most successful writer to testify candidly and movingly his frustrated aspirations as a black writer in a white supremacist era. While most of Dunbar’s fiction was designed primarily to entertain his white readers, the novel became an instrument of social analysis and direct confrontation in his hands against the prejudices, stereotypes, and racial mythologies that allowed whites to ignore worsening social conditions for blacks in the last decades of the 19th century. As segregation regimes took hold in the South in the 1890s with the tacit approval of the rest of the country, many Afro-Americans found a champion in Booker T. Washington who portrayed his own life in such a way as to suggest that even the most disadvantaged of black people could attain dignity and prosperity in the South by proving themselves valuable, productive members of society deserving of fair and equal treatment before the law. Then came William Edward Burghardt DuBois who disputed the main principle of Washington’s political program and asserted that, “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour-line.” His uncompromising racial and national consciousness dedicated to “the
ideal of human brotherhood” made him one of the most provocative and influential writer of the Afro-American literature.

During the first two decades of the 20th century, rampant racial injustices, led by grisly lynchings, gave strong impetus to protest writing. By the time the United States entered World War I in 1917, Harlem was well on its way to become a historical place and poets like Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer and Claude MacKay and novelists like Rudolph Fisher and Zora Neale Hurston etc. shouldered the Afro-American cause. But the greatest among them was Langston Hughes. Admiring all his predecessors and contemporaries, Hughes carved out a distinctive place for himself. He replaced MacKay’s formalism for the free verse of Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg. He also found ways to write in an Afro-American street vernacular that registers a much wider and deeper spectrum of mood and experiences than Dunbar was able to represent in his poetry. As against Cullen’s traditional forms and lyricism informed by the work of John Keats, Hughes embraced the rank and file of black America and proudly identified himself with his race and antecedents.

Langston Hughes is one of the most celebrated and acclaimed authors in Afro-American literary corpus recognized all over the world for his acute observation and portrayal of the life and experiences of his community. Hughes is known as the poet laureate of his ethnicity for the simple reason that he bespeaks like his people, of his people, and for his people. Jean Wagner rightly points out that Hughes’ poetry recognizes and defines an Afro-American on account of “his African origins, his history and his particular contribution to the civilizations in which he had been,
involved.” (395) He can also be classified as a modern poet who puts emphasis on the splinter self not only of his people suffering affronts in American society but also of all the downtrodden suffering the pangs of exploitation and estrangement in societies mired in deception and sleaze.

Hughes, as a creative artist, is not among those whom Stephen Gosson called caterpillars of [the] commonwealth.” (The School of Abuse) He is rather one who assumes the role of the poet to be accountable and wrote poems that carry emotional cadence and a purpose that won him wide recognition all over the world. Poetry, for him, is not, what Wordsworth argues, the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Arnold 180) but something more, that which interprets life for humanity, consoles it, sustains it and thus becomes “criticism of life.” (Arnold 261) Hughes gives a robust and pragmatic expression to the life of blacks that had been an experience of sorrow and disappointments. Experiencing racial bigotry and its dehumanizing pressures, Hughes eloquently expresses his ethnicity’s vaulted ambition of freedom, equality and justice in the United States of America. His poetry, as a result, becomes a life-long struggle against man’s cruelty toward others on account of their origin, colour and other racial differences.

He tries to affirm in his poetry that distinctive identity of his race which lay buried under the false stereotype of Jim Crow. Gwendolyn Brooks maintains that he is a noble poet, an efficient essayist, and an adventurous dramatist and his works and deeds are,

… rooted in kindness. Whether it was ‘artistically correct’ or not, his point of departure was a clear pride in his race. Race pride may be craft,
art, or a music that combines the best of jazz and hymn. Langston frolicked and chanted to the measure of his own race-reverence. (11)

As already mentioned the sensibility of Hughes as a creative writer was largely inspired and shaped by the earlier black Americans who advocated liberty and justice for their race. Following the tradition of earlier black poets, viz. Paul Lawrence Dunbar, W.E.B. DuBois, and James Weldon Johnson, to name a few important figures, Hughes’ poetry voices protest against slavery and other dehumanizing forces prevalent in the United States.

Langston Hughes weaved into his poems the many-sided experiences of his race which was a victim of racial injustice in America. On the one hand black Americans were fascinated by the over-enthusiastic character of the American Dream and, on the other, they were pained to be treated like a commodity and denied justice in the civilized society. This conflict between the reality and the dream finds an effective expression in Hughes’ poetry at large. Raymond Smith rightly opines in this connection,

[The] basic themes regarding the American dream and its possibilities for the black man were always in his poetry. The tension between the unrealized dream and the realities of the black experience in America provided the dynamic. The tension between material and theme laid the groundwork for the irony which characterized Hughes’s work at its best. (370)

This irony is present as much in his first phase as in his second and third phase though the experience and perspective do really change in each of these phases.
In order to appreciate Hughes’s accomplishments as a writer it is worthwhile to understand the literary context of the early twentieth century when he started writing. Early in the twentieth century Negroes in the North, aided by white friends, began a determined drive toward social and economic equality. This was a goal far beyond anything advocated in the past. Booker T. Washington, for example, had only wanted to extend the old plantation system in order to make the Negro a docile and satisfactory working man. The movement for an enlarged concept of equality prompted a group of young writers to reject the old patterns and create a new Negro literature. Hughes’s career is closely connected with this group’s assertion of literary independence that was part of a more general racial awakening popularly known as the Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Movement.

In the past Negro writers had found it impossible to attract an audience unless they used stereotyped characters or ignored their race completely. Paul Lawrence Dunbar, in novels and verse, chose the first course and William Braithwaite, in his anthologies and critical writings, the second. Hughes and his friends decided to write the story of the Negro without pretense or apology. Their stories, poems, and essays mark a turn from the old self-consciousness and self-denial to a proud new realism. Because of the quality of their work, and the general interest in all facets of Negro life in the 1920s, editors eagerly accepted the manuscripts of the new realists.

Langston Hughes achieved fame as a poet during the burgeoning of the arts known as the Harlem Renaissance, but those who label him a Harlem Renaissance poet have restricted his fame to only one genre and decade. In addition to his work as a poet, Hughes was a novelist, columnist, playwright, and essayist, and though he is
most closely associated with Harlem, his world travels influenced his writing in a profound way. He followed the example of Paul Laurence Dunbar, one of his early poetic influences, to become the second Afro-American to earn a living as a writer.

His long and distinguished career produced volumes of diverse genres and inspired the work of countless other Afro-American writers. All of Hughes’ writing, maintains Webster Smalley, has its own,

… intrinsic merit and his subject matter -- the Negro in America -- are of vital interest to Americans and, perhaps more than we are aware, to the world. No writer has better interpreted and portrayed Negro life, especially in the urban North, than Langston Hughes. (vii)

Langston Hughes inherited cultural and ethnic qualities of the black community and gave, with pride and gusto, an effective expression to those inherited tendencies of black community in his art. He believed in the black race and affirmed it in the United States through inherited blues, and jazz and spirituals.

Inspired by the articulation of freedom and equality along with brotherhood by the earlier black writers, Hughes shaped his sensibility under their influence. He is one of the rungs of that ladder of writers who voiced protest against slavery and dehumanization of blacks in the United States. He is one of those pioneers who reflected the Afro-Americans’ suppressed feelings, impressions and urges through literature. These writers expressed the black Americans’ aspirations to be free, to get equality, to get recognition for black art and culture, black aesthetic, etc.

As poetry is considered to be the most concentrated, compact and most allusive of the verbal arts, the blacks in America tried to get recognized and establish their
identity through poetry. Assuming the best-fitted instrument to vent one’s emotional and traumatic experiences, Langston Hughes chose poetry as his medium to express the African American experience. Jean Wagner aptly remarks,

Since poetry was one of the most ancient traditions of the black race, it was as a consequence…best fitted to express the psychic states of a whole people on the point of acquiring self-awareness and beginning to articulate its demands for social and cultural emancipation. (172)

It would, hence, be useful to have a brief look at the history of black poetry which shaped Langston Hughes’s art and made him the poet laureate of the blacks in America and the “giant of American letters, among its alumni.” (Tracy, Langston Hughes 17)

Black poetry is that poetry which is written by a person or group of persons of known black African ancestry. Its themes, structures and even vocabulary are identifiably black. This poetry has its own black aesthetic. It has a specific sociological, historical, political and cultural identity. It can be properly understood only after considering the ethnic roots and experiences of black Americans that lie in Africa itself. Even when we see no novelty of language or form, imagery or ideas in black poetry and it looks rather quaint, it is original in itself. It has the power to bring the reader very close to reality and arouse in him genuine emotions with the help of its virtues of simplicity, sincerity and veracity.

Black poetry came into existence after the publication of Phillis Wheatley’s Poems on Various Subjects in 1773. A nineteen-year-old slave at the time of writing poetry, Wheatley was born in Africa and with this publication,
[She] inaugurated the long and distinguished, but until recently neglected, line of black writers in America. The unique complexity and diversity of the Afro-American cultural heritage -- both Western and African, oral and written, slave and free, Judeo-Christian and pagan, plantation and urban, integrationist and black nationalist -- have effected tensions and fusions that, over the course of time, have produced a highly innovative and distinctive literature. (Abrams 144)

This, in fact, is called black literature or Afro-American literature.

It was, primarily, the “universal theme of rebellion against oppression” with which black literature gave itself a push. (Henderson 11) No doubt, it is the idea of liberation that has persistently been an important constituent of thematic clusters in black poetry. Whatever theme is taken up in black literature, it directly or indirectly stems from the blacks’ own bitter experiences, humiliations, sufferings on account of their status as an oppressed group or as slaves. They express their intention and theme with the historical background in their minds.

In this way, the black people in the United States define and clarify their conception of themselves and their literature reflects this process of self-definition with greater clarity and resonance. In fact, black poetry assumes its distinctive character because of the beastly oppression and tyranny that the blacks have suffered. Its fundamental thrust is that of raising a voice against slavery. Even after the emancipation in the United States, the blacks had to suffer indignity and humiliation. Their poetry is an outcome of this injustice.
Black poetry also evolved with the passage of time. In the beginning some poets only wrote because they wanted to show their caliber or talent of writing. There were some who used their talent in the abolitionist cause. There was yet another group that wrote in dialect and chose to portray the lives of the common folk, sometimes caricatured in the manner of whites. Also there were poets like Paul Lawrence Dunbar and James Edwin Campbell who presented wholesome, if not altogether realistic portraits of black folk life. The period “preceding the Harlem Renaissance not only produced the dialect poets but found many black poets studiously avoiding overt racial considerations.” (Henderson 14) Poetry was a romantic escape for many of them and not a perception of reality.

In fact, it was in 1920s that black life was depicted realistically in black writings in a systematic manner. It was the seamy side, the disharmonized side of black’s life which was portrayed by the blacks. It was a literature that dealt with the themes of racism, imperialism, religious hypocrisy, and other forms of social injustice. Black writers felt that it was the proper time to look at themselves with a deep sense of love and appreciation for black life and culture. Their special condition was a natural source for their art.

Black poets felt that true religion, freedom and education could not come to them unless they decided to be one and determined. The poetry of the Negro, in essence, was “the process of self-definition made clearer and sharper as the self-reliance and racial consciousness of an early period are revived and raised to the level of revolutionary thought.” (Henderson 16) This poetry made them think of themselves and it added to their self-knowledge. Larry Neal maintains that black poetry is,
… an art that addresses itself directly to black people; an art that speaks to us in terms of our feelings and ideas about the world; an art that validates the positive aspects of our life style… opens us up to the beauty and ugliness within us; that makes us understand our condition and each other in a more profound manner; that unites us, exposing us to our painful weaknesses and strengths; and finally, an art that posits for us the vision of a liberated future. (In Henderson 16-17)

Here can be seen the idea that black literature is not one’s private property but a great acreage. Through self analysis and introspection it can bring the ever cherished liberation from isolation, discrimination, slavery, and degradation.

Black poetry has its own specific contours, movement and direction. It moves in the direction of freedom and liberation. The great theme of black poetry in the United States is liberation and it draws its strength from historical work songs. The tough-minded power of the blues, the ingenious energy of jazz, and the uplifting vision of God in the spirituals and the sermons strengthened the idea of liberation. But in the initial phases when it was a long-term goal, it seemed to be an aspiration which did not touch short-term issues of day-to-day life.

The Negro remained aloof from the temporal, societal, and political realms when he rapturously transported himself in this envisioned life of freedom and dignity. It does not mean that the Negro forgot struggle, change and death completely but precedence was given to full realization of a strengthened and renewed world. In the later black poetry, too, there is a deep-rooted concern for spirituals rooted in the
idiom of the black church. It continued to assert itself, as is evident from the concern to explore and experience the religions of Islam and Africa.

The structure of black poetry is derived from two basic sources -- black speech and black music. To know black poetry it is necessary to have a deep and sympathetic knowledge of black music and black speech i.e. the people, plainly speaking, who make the music and speech. The speech spoken by majority of black people in America is called black speech. It includes the techniques and timbres of the sermon and other forms of oratory, the rap, the signifying, and the oral folktale.

Black music means various black songs -- spirituals, jubilees, shouts, gospel songs, blues, jazz, and non-jazz music -- by black composers who consciously or unconsciously draw upon the black musical tradition. Both black speech and black music are inseparable. Without considering the verbal components of these two one cannot talk about or discuss the spirituals or blues or formally literary black poetry.

The sources of black speech and songs are journals of the black slaves kept by the whites and the text of the songs themselves and folktales. But the living speech of black community, both urban and rural, itself is the most important source which forms a kind of continuum of blackness. The ear, no doubt, proves to be the best guide when one considers black speech and music. Stephen Henderson writes that the black poets,

… use black speech forms consciously because they know that black people -- the mass of us -- do not talk like white people. They know that despite the lies and distortions of the minstrels -- both ancient and modern, unlearned and academic -- and despite all of the critical jargon
about ‘ghettos’ and ‘plantation English,’ there is a complex and rich; powerful and subtle linguistic heritage whose resources have scarcely been touched that they draw upon. (33)

These poets could say things beautifully even if it were ugly things. It might be called slang and dialect but black people called it soul talk. Folk practice of kidding and similar kinds of word play or witty gesture involved in nicknaming gave rise to virtuoso naming and enumerating that could overwhelm the listener. Jazz rhythmic effects, virtuous free rhyming, hyperbolic imagery, metaphysical imagery, understatement, etc. are some of the forms of black speech and song.

Black poets communicated to the readers without any seepage or loss of force their sense of blackness and conformity to the observed and intuited truth of the black experience. Their poems must never be considered in isolation but in relationship to the reader or audience. Further the reader must also take into consideration the wider context of the phenomenon of black experience. It should always be borne in mind that the poem in question, when it is studied, deals with black experience. The reader simply knows it even though there are no verbal or other clues to alert him. The black poet is invariably immersed or saturated in the black experience whether positive or negative even when it shows no visible signs of this distinctive mark at the superficial level of the form chosen for the articulation of this experience.

A character in black poetry, whether it is described objectively or autobiographically, might be perfectly black. It is the blackness of the black that is put before the reader for his consideration, because “the knowledge of blackness is the knowledge of pain and oppression as well as joy. It is a knowledge rooted in history
and the real world, in all of its incompleteness and fragmentation.” (Henderson 69) It also, for this reason, very often assumes an action-oriented or exhortationist voice in the spirit which demands real action -- social, political and moral -- in the real, harsh world, to make it fit for living without any racial discrimination, segregation, oppression and exploitation. The central character in black poetry is the sum of different parts -- action, speech, or thoughts and in this case the character is identifiably black. The character may be an invention based on real life observations and experiences or may be a historical or legendary figure.

To understand black poetry, one can safely say, black community itself is a primary source. If a black poem is to be understood on the most elementary level, it must be in terms of its themes and structure. Black experience and black community provide the dominant theme as well as the basic elements of its structure.

Langston Hughes is black America’s most representative writer and a significant figure in world literature in the twentieth century. He speaks in a voice familiar to all blacks. He addresses himself primarily to the problems of black artist qua artist and artistic integrity -- accepting one’s self and one’s race. He became a writer not merely to amuse either the white or black audience but under a strong inner urge to articulate the experiences of being a member of black community in America. It is to Langston Hughes’s credit that he “never lost touch with the realities of black life, but it is also to his credit that he used whatever he found in whatever culture he visited.” (Unterecker 482)

Black folk and cultural sources form an important basis of Langston Hughes’s art. He is the representative poet of young generation of black writers who tried to
develop an artistic form that reflects a grip upon realities as they exist in everyday life in black communities. “In Langston Hughes’s vision,” writes George E. Kent, “both in regard to the folk and to himself, the most nearly consistent focus is upon a lifemanship that preserves and celebrates humanity in the face of impossible odds.” (188)

His adaptation of the Blues, with their form and attitudes is an essential part of his art and it becomes his most obvious innovation and original experience. He is at his best when he tries to capture the spirit and the varied experiences of the blues.

But Langston Hughes’s art is not confined to a single form viz. the blues; he drew from the whole black culture. He also captured the black religious tradition and its cultural modes of expression, the spirituals, gospel songs, and the sermon. Poems like “Aunt Sue’s Stories,” “The Negro Mother,” and “Mother to Son” are clear examples of catching the moods and experiences, determination and persistence found in the spirituals, gospel songs, and the sermons. Steven C. Tracy genuinely writes,

The blues poems that Hughes wrote were often thematic rather than associative… reflecting the themes and images of the folk tradition. His language and images, in fact, are not often as stark or startling as the best blues lyrics by performers within the oral tradition but they make excellent use of both oral and written traditions in a way that adds materially to both, making his poetry something quite familiar, yet quite new. (57-58)
His point of departure, whether artistically correct or not, was always a strong sense of pride in his race. His race pride may be craft, art, or a music that combines the best of jazz and hymns.

Langston Hughes, like Walt Whitman, believed in the democratic America. Tony Tanner has very aptly stated that Walt Whitman,

…celebrated both the idea of an American society in which everyone would flow together in a loving ‘ensemble’, and also the ‘principle of individuality, the pride and centripetal isolation of a human being in himself -- identity -- personalism’ still confronts the American writer in various forms. (19)

Langston Hughes’s commitment to an ideal America was deeply felt and abiding. Despite the fact that he was quite aware of the inequities of democracy, he had a deep faith that one day justice would prevail in the United States and the deferred dream of liberty, equality, and fraternity would be fulfilled.

There is a direct link between Langston Hughes and Walt Whitman. Both shared common attitudes and certain feelings about what is worthwhile and valuable to one and all. Donald B. Gibson says that in some very important ways Langston Hughes is unlike Walt Whitman yet their poetry reveals some obvious similarities. The critic emphasizes,

Hughes and Whitman are firm believers in the possibilities of realization of the American ideal; both see the American nation as in process of becoming. Both are more cheerful than not…. Both are free
in their choice of subject…. Both adopt personae, preferring to speak in voices other than their own. They are social poets in the sense that they rarely write about private, subjective matters, about the workings of the inner recesses of their own minds. (66)

In his famous essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” published in 1926, Hughes maintains that the word white symbolize all the virtues including beauty, morality and money to such Negroes who want to be white. This is the high mountain that a Negro artist has to climb in order to discover himself and his people. Despite the rocky and high mountain, he adds, the Negro artists “can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with fears.” (Hughes, The New Negro 473) The artist has to work against an undertow of scathing criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the race. The essay is, maintains Arnold Rampersad, “timeless a statement of the young black artist’s constant dilemma, caught between the contending forces of black and white culture, and caught between class divisions within his or her own racial group.” (Rampersad, African 203) “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in a way, outpours the social, aesthetic and class-conscious development of black literature.

Hughes’ poetry is also remarkable for his discerning depiction of the struggle of an Afro-American to relocate his self in the environment in which he lives. He, as a literary artist, seems to be quite conscious of the predicament of the Afro-American in terms of existence and highlights his confrontation with the complexities of life in general. Self, in the poetry of Hughes, is not only the Afro-American who survives the
Jim Crow America but the whole of marginalized and exploited lot, the poor workers, and the subjugated ethnicities that become a part of it.

The informed reader of Hughes finds his poetic persona moving from the depths of Africa to the streets of America in order to have connections and thus the meaning of existence. One can also see glimpses of negritude in his poetry and also the revolutionary stance that takes the poet’s sensibility towards Marxism. Toward the end of his career, nonetheless, the poet mellows down and acquires a long-term perspective to achieve his goal -- realization of self in an atmosphere full of challenges and affronts.

Langston Hughes, as a man and literary artist, celebrates the perceptive and varied experiences of Afro-American community living in America -- a land of unbounded opportunities. He speaks eloquently for the oppressed and marginalized who had to suffer indignities in the United States on account of their being black and poor. His writings, Eric J. Sundquist opines, are “filled with an evidence of a life long struggle against racial bigotry.” (41) America, Hughes asserts in his writings, failed to fulfill its promises of equality and genuine fraternal society. America became, on the other hand, a land of unfulfilled ideals and a nation where opportunities were rare, equality was on papers, and liberty for all was a dangerously tempting pseudo notion which turned this fertile land of opportunities, for blacks, into a dark castle of gloom and plight.

Hughes could sense the finer feelings of his race being squeezed and dried, and also their condition when they were dubbed as aliens or outsiders in the land they have been living for centuries. Though the representation of the Afro-American subalternity
has been a major issue in the literary output of Hughes, he remained devoted to the articulation of the shared urges and aspiration of his people in a modern and contemporary perspective. Hughes catches varied moods and perspectives of this “subordinate particularity in America where power relations are actually spatialized, thus, forming a territoriality of the silenced group.” (Beverly 2) Hughes’ protest against the racial injustice inflicted upon the black Americans by the racist whites fills his entire literary output and takes varied shapes and colours. If it is the latent anger in the 1920s, in 1930s it becomes outrageous as he fell under the unswerving influence of Marxism. Toward the mid-1940s, nonetheless, the anger and resentment mellows down and the poet acquires a long-term perspective and speaks in a vein quite different from his earlier phases.

Hughes’ racial concerns are deeply rooted in and routed through his ancestral homeland Africa which is always in his mind when he talks about America and the rest of the world. He never forgets its blues and jazz, its electric and stucco rhythm, its mesmerizing folklores, and, above all, its darkness that is directly related to their colour and features. Jean Wagner rightly points out that Hughes’ poetry recognizes and defines an Afro-American on account of “his African origins, his history and his particular contribution to the civilizations in which he had been, involved.” (395) Africa, he knew, is the spiritual homeland of every Afro-American who has to bear the affronts of slavery and racial injustice in America. He takes pride in being a descent from Africa and a vehicle to carry on its vastness and mysteriousness onto the stage of the world. This sense of negritude dominates in the first phase of his poetic
career, but it gets subdued gradually in later poems as other concerns overpower his creative output in many forms.

As every writer is an outcome and a product of the social and political environment in which he lives and the social pressures he has to bear, it is imperative to study the life of Hughes that influenced his literary sensibility to a considerable extent. This is all the more important for a better understanding of the writer’s engagement with the issues that played a vital role in his life and shaped his experiences.

Hughes was born James Mercer Langston Hughes in Joplin, Missouri on February 1, 1902, the second son of Carrie Mercer Langston Hughes, a teacher, and her husband, James Nathaniel Hughes. Two years before, nearly to the day, his parents had mourned the death of their first-born infant. They had buried him on a snowy February 8, 1900 in a pauper’s grave. Langston, as if marked from birth to survive, states Faith Berry, “would live to prove it. from the cradle to the grave, he was destined to overcome the odds against him.” (Langston Hughes 1)

After leaving his family and the resulting legal dissolution of the marriage later, James Hughes left for Cuba, then Mexico, due to enduring racism in the United States. After the separation of his parents, young Langston was left to be raised mainly by his maternal grandmother, Mary Langston, as his mother sought employment, the early separation of his parents, the frequent moving about from one place to another, the absence of a father, the presence of poverty and racial discrimination -- each in its way marked him for life, but never made him bitter. (Berry, Langston Hughes 4)
Through the black American oral tradition of storytelling, she would instill in the young Langston Hughes a sense of indelible racial pride. The influence of her grandmother is clearly visible in poems like “Aunt Sue’s Stories.” He, at this point, spent most of his childhood in Lawrence, Kansas.

Growing up with his maternal grandmother was one of the most indelible experiences, among the deeply felt experiences of his youth, that stayed with him throughout his life. She provided him a home, but she was never a substitute for his parents. As he reflects upon his childhood in *The Big Sea,*

I was unhappy for a long time, and very lonesome living with my grandmother. Then it was that books began to happen to me, and I began to believe in books -- where if people suffered, they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables, as we did in Kansas. And where almost always the mortgage got paid. (*The Big Sea* 16)

After the sad demise of his grandmother, he went to live with family friends, James and Mary Reed, for two years. Their simple but settled way of life gave Hughes a sense of routine and security he had not known with either his mother or grandmother. With the Reeds he became less lonely, introspective boy who withdrew into a world of books. Nonetheless, Mrs. Reed, an ardent Christian, tried to instil religion into him. She demanded Langston’s weekly attendance at sunday school and church.

Hughes, however, had no bent of mind toward such religion that would nurture Jim Crow attitude in the people. On one occasion, at Auntie Reed’s insistence, young
Hughes attended a revival where the children of the congregation were asked to come forward and commit themselves to Christ. Hughes, experiencing no great surge of spirituality, as he had been told he would, went forward simply to avoid being the only child who refused. Abed that night, feeling lost and deceitful, feeling let down by a Jesus who had not appeared, he buried his head beneath the covers and sobbed aloud, unable to stop.

The rejuvenation episode revealed an attitude, unconscious at that time, which did not change as Hughes grew older. Religion as an expression of piety, reveals Faith Berry, “impressed him not at all; yet, as a non-believer, his greatest doubts often brought him closest to faith.” (Langston Hughes 9) As an adult, he believed that organised religion had failed. He refused to join a church, and rarely entered one except to attend special programs or to listen to gospel music. The Negro spirituals haunted him and were echoed in some of his verse. But also echoed in his verse are the doubts, the questionings of the existence of a god, the strange, oppressive dichotomy of one who wants to believe and cannot.

Due to an unstable early life, Hughes’ childhood was not an entirely happy one. It was, at the same time, one that heavily influenced the poet that would reverberate in his literary oeuvre later on. Later, he lived again with his mother in Lincoln, Illinois, who had remarried when he was still an adolescent, and eventually in Cleveland, Ohio, where he attended high school.

Although his youth was marked with transition, Hughes extracted meaning from the places and people whence he came. The search for employment led his mother and stepfather, Homer Clark, to move several times. Hughes moved often
between the households of his grandmother, his mother, and other surrogate parents. Growing up in the Midwest (Lawrence, Kansas; Topeka, Kansas; Lincoln, Illinois; Cleveland, Ohio), young Hughes learned the blues and spirituals. He would subsequently weave these musical elements into his own poetry and fiction.

In a Cleveland, Ohio, high school, Hughes was designated *class poet* and there he published his first short stories. He became friends with some white classmates, yet he also suffered racial insult at the hands of other whites. He learned first-hand to distinguish decent from reactionary white folks, distinctions he would reiterate in his novel *Not Without Laughter* and in his “Here to Yonder” columns in *The Chicago Defender*.

Seeking some consolation and continuity in the midst of the myriad relocations of his youth, he grew to love books. His love of reading developed into a desire to write as he sought to replicate the powerful impact other writers from many cultures had made upon him. In his writing, Hughes accomplished an important feat. While others wallowed in self-revelation as a balm for their loneliness, Hughes often transformed his own agonies into the sufferings endured by the collective race and sometimes of all humankind.

After graduating from Central High School in Cleveland in 1920, he moved to Mexico City to live with his father for one year. His mother fumed about his departure, and his father offered him little warmth. Yet, with his unique gift for writing, Hughes turned the pain engendered by his parents’ conflict into the noted poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” published by *Crisis* in 1921.
Hughes gathered new experiences and new insights about race, class, and ethnicity in Mexico, where his ability to speak Spanish and his appearance often allowed him to blend in. Even Americans who would not have spoken to him in Cleveland or Kansas City would converse with him as a Mexican on the train. Although brown skin no longer remained an obstacle in Mexico, Hughes saw that poverty still reached many Mexicans. Numerous works, including a children’s play, capture fragments of Hughes’s days in Mexico.

When he left his ambitious father in Mexico, Hughes was expected to earn an engineering degree at Columbia University. Himself a brown, Hughes’ father looked down upon the Negroes as being ignorant, backward and lethargic. He was of the opinion that the Afro-Americans themselves were responsible for their deplorable present. “My father hated Negroes,” writes Hughes, “I think he hated himself, too, for being a Negro. He disliked all of his family because they were Negroes.” (The Big Sea 40) Failing to digest it humbly, Hughes broke abruptly with his insulted father, in the first of many brave and daring moves, and withdrew from Columbia in 1922, and one year later he began his world travels. He visited several ports in Africa and he worked as a dishwasher in a Paris cabaret. Poems and short stories capture some of his impressions abroad. He sent a few of the pieces back home, where they were published, enhancing his growing reputation as a writer.

When financial strain ended his travels, Hughes returned to the United States. He once again attempted various forms of work, this time in Washington, D.C., where his mother had moved. Besides blue-collar work, he also served briefly in the office of publisher and historian Carter G. Woodson. Although he respected Dr. Woodson’s
significance to the Afro-American community, Hughes did not like the eyestrain or the detail of his assignments. Nevertheless, he continued to write. In 1925, he won first prize in poetry for “The Weary Blues” in *Opportunity* magazine. He also met writer Carl Van Vechten, who assisted Hughes in securing a book contract with publisher Alfred A. Knopf. Hughes also enjoyed his discovery by poet Vachel Lindsay as the busboy poet.

No one expressed the flamboyant Harlem cabaret life better than Hughes and no one equaled him in setting down the spirit and challenge of the new Negro generation. He is, as Saunders Redding points out, “the most prolific and the most representative of the new Negroes.” (ix) The new Negro generation, a part and product of popularly known little regeneration, viz. Harlem Renaissance, celebrated its colour and other racial heritage and took pride in being an African. This period, i.e. “Harlem’s Golden Era,” as Hughes put it, “becomes an important phase in the life of Afro-American culture and needs to be discussed in some details for a better understanding of how and to what extent this awakening of African culture shaped the personality of Afro-American community.” (*African Forum* 12)

The Harlem Renaissance (also known as the Black Literary Renaissance and New Negro Renaissance) is a significant movement and refers to the flowering of Afro-American literature, art, and drama during the 1920s and 1930s. Although Afro-American literature and art began a steady development just before the turn of the century, this found its exuberance in 1920s only. Harlem Renaissance is that artistic regeneration as a consequence of which the Negro became an object of intense interest
and scrutiny. It was centered at Harlem in New York. Harlem extended from 110 Street North to 155 Street with Seventh and Lenox Avenue as main thoroughfares,

Its Southern boundary was effectively 125th street fifteen blocks North of Central Park and far North of Lower Manhattan famous skyline. Its Northwest province was Sugar Hills, the Southern boundary of which was 145th. (Jackson, *The Comic Imagination* 1)

Harlem, the Negro metropolis, hardly existed in 1910. The Negro migration during the First World War gradually converted it into a great Negro city with 175,000 of coloured men by the end of First World War. Harlem embodied bourgeois values for the Negroes. It became the Mecca of migrants, especially artists. It was the biggest and brightest spot in a promised land for the Negroes. While studying Harlem Renaissance one must see it “through its deep substrata in Negro life, as an expression of evolution and change rooted in all of the history of the Negro from emancipation until the 1920s.” (Jackson, *Black* 40) Harlem became synonymous with opportunity and release of the individual spirit. Nathan Irvin Huggins rightly writes in his notable book *Harlem Renaissance* that it is “not surprising that black man’s dreams would find in Harlem a capital for the race, a platform from which the new black voice would be heard round the world and intellectual center of the new Negro.” (14) Further he says that Harlem was created as a place of exotic culture and it was as much of service to the whites’ needs as it was for the blacks.

No doubt, the seeds of Harlem Renaissance were sown earlier but it flourished in the 1920s. As M.H. Abrams says, the decade of 1920s “was also the early period of the Harlem Renaissance. After World War I, the population of the area of upper
Manhattan known as Harlem was almost exclusively black, and became the national center of Afro-American culture including the art of theater, music and dance.” (147) The Negro writers produced at least one hit play every season during Harlem renaissance. Books were written and published with much greater frequency and much publicity than ever before or since in history. Even the white writers wrote about the Negroes more successfully for commercial gains than the Negroes did about themselves. It was a period when the Negro was in vogue. In 1925, in an article for Alain Locke’s anthology The New Negro, James Weldon Johnson wrote,

> Harlem is not merely a Negro colony or community; it is a city within a city, the greatest Negro city in the world. It is not a slum or a fringe; it is located in the heart of Manhattan and occupies one of the most beautiful and healthful sections of the city. It is...made up of new-law apartments and handsome dwellings, with well-paved and well-lighted streets. It has its own churches, social and civic centers, shops, theatres and other places of amusement. And it contains more Negroes to the square mile than any other spot on earth. (Singh 8)

In Harlem Renaissance, Nathan Irvin Huggins points to the basic contradiction that was at the heart of this important phenomenon that captured everybody’s imagination when it first took place. He says that what passed for a movement was a vast promotional scheme, based on innocent black aspirations and corrupting white money. According to Charles T. Davis, Huggins is of the view that,

> … the Renaissance was a misguided effort to create a serious high culture and that this attempt was doomed to failure because black art was removed
from the people, from authentic ethnic roots, and from a true view of social
and political reality. (139)

The Harlem renaissance began as a result of the changes in the Afro-American
community after the end of the Civil War. The Afro-American community had
established a middle class, especially in the cities. Before relocating to Harlem, most
of New York City’s Afro-Americans lived in neighbourhoods commonly known as
black bohemia. In the beginning of twentieth century, several middle-class Afro-
Americans abandoned black bohemia in favour of Harlem. This initiated a move
North of educated Afro-Americans and a foothold in Harlem. In 1910, a large block
along with 135th street and Fifth Avenue was bought by various Afro-American
realtors and a church group.

The great migration brought hundreds of thousands of Afro-Americans to the
cities of the Northern United States. Harlem, in New York City, became a center of
social and literary change in the early 20th century. Alongside the social change was a
political undercurrent, fostered by groups such as the newly-formed NAACP
(National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People) and individuals such
as Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. DuBois. Jazz and blues, staple music of the South,
came to the North with the migrants and was played in the nightclubs and hotspots of
Harlem.

The literary and artistic participants in the Harlem renaissance had a sense and
commitment of taking part in a common endeavor to give artistic expression to the
Afro-American experience. With diversity of their expression as a chief feature, these
participants had a strong sense of racial pride and desire for social and political
equality. Some common themes presented in this little regeneration, nonetheless, are alienation, marginality of blacks through institutional racism and an attempt to integrate into a diverse community, the use of African folk material, and the blues tradition. The renaissance also had certain sociological development, particularly through a new racial consciousness and racial pride.

Historians disagree as to when the Harlem renaissance began and ended. It is unofficially recognized to have spanned from 1919 until the early or mid 1930s although its ideas lived on much longer. The zenith of this flowering of Negro literature, as James Weldon Johnson preferred to call the Harlem Renaissance, is placed between 1924; the year that *Opportunity* magazine hosted a party for black writers where many white publishers were in attendance, and 1929; the year of the stock market crash and then the resulting great depression.

Most of the participants in the Afro-American literary movement descended from a generation whose parents or grandparents were slaves, and themselves having lived through the gains and losses of reconstruction after the American Civil War. Many of these people were part of the great migration out of the South and other racially stratified communities who sought relief from prejudices and a better standard of living in the North and midwest regions of the United States. Others were Africans and people of African descent from the Caribbean who had come to the United States hoping for a better life. Uniting most of them was their convergence in Harlem, New York city.

Characterizing the Harlem renaissance was an overt racial pride that came to be represented in the idea of the new Negro who through intellect, the production of
literature, art, and music could challenge the pervading racism and stereotypes of that era to promote progressive or socialist politics, and racial and social integration. The creation of art and literature would serve to uplift the race. There would be no set style or uniting form singularly characterizing art coming out of the Harlem renaissance.

Rather, there would be a mix of celebrating a wide variety of cultural elements, including a Pan-Africanist perspective, high-culture and the low-culture or low-life, from the traditional form of music to the blues and jazz, traditional and new experimental forms in literature like modernism, and in poetry, for example, the new form of jazz poetry. This duality would eventually result in a number of Afro-American artists of the Harlem renaissance coming into conflict with conservatives in the black intelligentsia who would take issue with certain depictions of black life in whatever medium of the arts.

The Harlem renaissance was one of primarily Afro-American involvement and an interpersonal support system of black patrons, black owned businesses and publications. On the periphery, however, it was supported by a number of white Americans who provided various forms of assistance, opening doors which otherwise would have remained closed to the publicizing of their work outside of the black American community. This support often took the form of patronage or publication. Then, there were those whites interested in so-called primitive cultures, as many whites viewed black American culture at that time, and wanted to see this primitivism in the work coming out of the Harlem renaissance. Other interpersonal dealings between whites and blacks can be categorized as exploitative because of the desire to capitalize on the fad, and fascination of the Afro-American being in vogue.
This vogue of the Afro-American would extend to Broadway, as in Porgy and Bess, and into music where in many instances white band leaders would defy racist attitude to include the best and the brightest Afro-American stars of music and song. For blacks, their art was a way to prove their humanity and demand for equality. For a number of whites, preconceived prejudices were challenged and overcome. In the early 20th century the Harlem renaissance reflected social and intellectual changes in the Afro-American community. An increase of education and employment opportunities had developed by the turn of the century.

Contributions that lead to the rise of the Harlem renaissance included the great migration of Afro-Americans to the Northern cities and World War I and the factors leading to the decline of this era include the great depression. Corresponding with the Harlem renaissance was the beginning of mainstream publishing. Many authors began to publish novels, magazines and newspapers during this time. Publishers began to attract a great amount of attention from the nation at large. Some famous authors during this time included Jean Toomer, Jessie Fauset, Claude MacKay, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke and Eric D. Walrond.

The Harlem renaissance would help lay the foundation of the civil rights movement. Moreover, many black artists coming into their own creativity after this literary movement would take inspiration from it and Langston Hughes started his poetic career after imbibing these spirits of Harlem renaissance and became a poet spokesman of his people.

In the year 1926, when Hughes’s *The Weary Blues* appeared, Hughes returned to college, this time as an older student and an acclaimed poet at the nation’s first
Afro-American college, Lincoln University, in Pennsylvania. Spending any available weekend soaking up theater and music in nearby New York city, Hughes satisfied academic requirements during the week.

The Harlem renaissance was in full bloom, and Hughes became one of the celebrated young talents who flourished during this era. Some controversy attended his celebrity, however. Not all blacks relished his use of dialect, his interpretation of blues and jazz, or his vivid and sensitive portrayals of workers in his second book of verse *Fine Clothes to the Jew* that got published in 1927. Hughes faced harsh criticism, including his designation not as poet laureate but as the “poet low-rate of Harlem and a sewer dweller.” (*The Big Sea* 265-66)

As Hughes completed his years at Lincoln University in 1929, he also completed his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, published in 1930. Still receiving financial assistance from Charlotte Mason, the patron he shared with Zora Neale Hurston and Alain Locke, among others, Hughes also accepted her advice regarding the contents and tone of the novel. He expressed disappointment with the completed novel, but the text remains in print, retaining uplifting representations of the diverse populations within the black community.

In 1930, however, Hughes separated from the control and the financial support of Mason. His integrity meant more to him than any luxuries her wealth could provide, thus, as with the break from his father, Hughes abandoned financial security in search of his own goals. When Mason disapproved of him, Hurston and Locke, who remained loyal to her, dropped from Hughes’s list of associates.
Following the advice of Mary McLeod Bethune and sponsored by an award from the Rosenwald Foundation, Hughes began to tour the South with his poetry. Highly regarded as a reader, handsome and warm in person, Hughes gained many readers and admirers during his tours. He also visited the scottsboro boys in Alabama, who were accused of raping a white woman. Hughes created poetic and dramatic responses to the men’s plight and the mixed reactions of the American public.

In 1932, Hughes went to Russia with a group of Afro-Americans to assist with a film project that never bore fruit. When the project dissolved, most of the participants returned to the United States, but Hughes set off to explore the USSR. In his own observations of the Soviet Union, Hughes saw many reasons to appreciate communism. Thus, while many other American writers were attracted to socialistic perspectives during the depression years, Hughes openly praised practices he had observed in the Soviet Union, no Jim Crow, no anti-semitism, and education and medical care for everyone. He wrote numerous poems to capture those travels, and later, in both his Chicago Defender column and in his second autobiography, I Wonder As I Wander (1956), he recorded impressions of his travels.

Following the journey to the Soviet Union, Hughes completed work on his first volume of short stories: The Ways of White Folks (1934). In 1936 he received a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship and worked with the karamu house in Cleveland, Ohio, on several plays. His interest in theater continued in New York, where he founded the Harlem Suitcase Theater in 1938. A 1941 Rosenwald Fund fellowship further supported his play writing. However, he also moved into another genre. His
interesting family heritage, his remarkable travels, and his participation in Afro-American culture led to his first autobiographical volume: *The Big Sea* (1940).

When the United States plunged into World War II, Hughes escaped military service, but he put his pen to work on behalf of political involvement and nationalism. Writing jingles to encourage the purchase of war bonds, and writing weekly columns in the *Chicago Defender*, Hughes encouraged readers to support the Allies. His appeals remained consistent with the *Double-V* campaign upheld by the black press, victory at home and victory abroad. Hughes encouraged black Americans to support the United States in its goals abroad, but he encouraged the government to provide for its own citizens at home the same freedoms being advocated abroad.

A fictional voice emerged from these columns, that of Jesse B. Simple, better known as “Simple.” While the character initially appeared as a Harlem everyman who needed encouragement to support the racially segregated U.S. armed forces, Simple evolved into a popular and enduring fictional character. The first volume of stories to develop from Simple’s appearances in the *Chicago Defender* was published by Simon and Schuster in 1950: *Simple Speaks His Mind*.

Hughes retained his interest in theater, working with Kurt Weill and Elmer Rice to develop a musical adaptation of Rice’s play *Street Scene*. The musical opened on Broadway in 1947, where it enjoyed a brief run proved financially beneficial to Hughes.

Another significant theatrical collaboration involved William Grant Still, the first black composer in the United States to have a symphony performed by a major symphony orchestra, the first to have an opera produced by a major company in
America, and the first to conduct a white major symphony orchestra in the deep South. They collaborated on *Troubled Island*, based on the life of Jean Jacques Dessalines of Haiti, which Hughes had transformed from a play to a libretto. Hughes was in Spain reporting on the Spanish civil war for the *Baltimore Afro-American* while still adapted his libretto for an opera. Yet the project finally reached completion and opened in New York in 1949.

During the 1940s Hughes’s poetry also continued to be published: *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942), *Fields of Wonder* (1947), and *One-Way Ticket* (1949). He also engaged in some translation projects involving both French and Spanish texts. Hughes’s success as a writer was acknowledged through the award of $1,000 from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1945. With his friend Arna Bontemps, he edited *The Poetry of the Negro* (1949).

The 1950s brought the cold war and the horrors of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s subcommittee on subversive activities. With his published record of socialistic sentiments and his public associations with known communists, Hughes endured several years of attacks and boycotts. In 1953 he received a subpoena to testify about his interests in communism. Holding fast to his own dream of sustaining his career as a writer, Hughes salvaged his image as a loyal American citizen by insisting that the pro-communist works he had published no longer represented his thinking. Although he bravely challenged authority figures earlier in his life, in this situation he acted to protect his chosen profession. He retained speaking engagements and his works continued to sell, but he lost the respect of some political activists. Communists bitterly resented the way he abandoned professed members of the party, including
W.E.B. DuBois and Paul Robeson, whom Hughes had lauded in earlier decades. Hughes chose self-preservation and sustained his career as a writer.

A career as a writer often led Hughes to accept multiple book contracts simultaneously, thereby imposing upon himself an arduous schedule of production. Correspondence housed in the Beinecke collection at Yale University, in the special collections of Fisk University, in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and collected in the Charles Nichols edition of *Arna Bontemps - Langston Hughes Letters: 1925-1967* (1980) reveal Hughes’s frantic pace of writing, editing, revising, and publishing from the 1950s to the end of his life. He began to offer juvenile histories, including *Famous American Negroes* and *The First Book of Rhythms* in 1954, and *The First Book of Jazz* and *Famous Negro Music Makers* in 1955. He collaborated with photographer Roy De Carava on *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* in 1956, and in the same year he wrote *Tambourines to Glory*, *The First Book of the West Indies*, and his second autobiography *I Wonder As I Wander*.


The last ten years of Hughes’s life were marked by an astonishing proliferation of books, juvenile histories, poetry volumes, single genres anthologies *Laughing to Keep From Crying* (short stories), 1952; *Selected Poems*, (1957); *The Best of Simple*, (1961); and *Something in Common and Other Stories*, (1963); a collection of genres *Langston Hughes Reader*, (1958); and an adult history of the NAACP *Fight for
Hughes edited *An African Treasury* (1960); *Poems from Black Africa, Ethiopia, and Other Countries* (1963); *New Negro Poets, U.S.A.* (1964); and *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* (1967), in which he became the first to publish a short story by Alice Walker. Some of his efforts in drama were collected by Webster Smalley which included *Five Plays by Langston Hughes: Tambourines to Glory, Soul Gone Home, Little Ham, Mulatto, Simply Heavenly*.

Hughes was inducted into the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1961, the year he published his innovative book of poems to be read with jazz accompaniment, *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*. During the 1950s he also recorded an album of himself reading some of his earlier verse, accompanied by jazz great Charles Mingus.

Hughes shifted his weekly newspaper column from *The Chicago Defender* to *The New York Post*. While Hughes had never shunned aggressive politics, he was mistaken for a timid accommodationist. Readers’ letters revealed ignorance about his consistently positive appreciation of black people and culture and his consistently fair treatment of people of all races and cultures. Resilient even to the end of his life, Hughes withstood accusations that he foolishly joked about racial turmoil. He endured the hostile criticism, but in 1965 he ended his 22-year tenure as a newspaper columnist.

Hughes’s death on May 22, 1967, apparently resulted from infection following prostate surgery and two weeks of treatment at the New York Polyclinic Hospital. Memorial services followed many of his own wishes, including the playing of Duke Ellington’s “Do Nothing Till You Hear from Me.”
The works of Hughes continued to appear even after his death. He had prepared *The Panther and the Lash* (1967), a collection of poems, but it was not published until after his death. Collaborations such as *Black Magic* (with Milton Meltzer, 1967) and a revision of the 1949 anthology, *The Poetry of the Negro 1746-1970* (edited by Hughes and Arna Bontemps, 1970) were published, acknowledging his contributions and lamenting his death.

Subsequent years have brought *Good Morning Revolution*, a collection of radical verse and essays (edited by Faith Berry, 1973); *Collected Poems*, a comprehensive and well-indexed chronological collection of his poetry (edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, 1994); *The Return of Simple*, a new collection of his Jesse B. Simple tales (edited by Akiba Sullivan Harper, 1994); *Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender*, a collection of his non-Simple newspaper columns (edited by Christopher C. De Santis, 1995); and *Langston Hughes Short Stories*, retrieving previously unpublished short stories and collecting some now out of print.

A part of the writer’s life is revealed in his two autobiographies *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander* published in 1940 and 1950 respectively. *The Big Sea* highlights how Hughes’ continuous confrontations with racial bigotry and hypocrisy of the racist whites shaped his sensibility as a writer. The book provides a personal and historical sense of his perception and analysis of America set-up and, as a result, becomes “a most valuable contribution to the struggle of the Negro for life and justice and freedom and intellectual liberty in America.” (*Langston Hughes: Poet of His People* 126) *I Wonder as I Wander* begins from where *The Big Sea* ends and covers
Hughes’ life from 1931 to 1937. These two books are vital for a better understanding of Hughes’ journey of life and development as a creative writer.

A brief look at the life and experiences relating to the ups and downs in Hughes’ life reveals that he was a product of his age and articulates the serious concerns of his people in America. He is an engaged poet and a spokesman for proletarian causes. He is a dynamic individual who searches for his identity by writing from all the perspectives he has experienced. To see him as less than this or to categorize him simply as an Afro-American poet is reductionary and stereotypical. Just like the speaker in his poems, Hughes can step outside Afro-American culture and analyze black actions from the mainstream white perspective in which he has been educated. But as a persecuted Afro-American, Hughes still has every right to sing “The Weary Blues” himself. During Hughes’ sixty-five years, he led one of the most eventful literary lives of the twentieth century. An exceptionally prolific writer, he is often called the Dean of Black Letters and remains one of the most influential and innovative writers of the twentieth century.

If Hughes was anxious for love and a settled identity, he found it in his relationship with his black audience. He wanted to create a Negro culture in America -- a real, solid, sane racial something growing out of the folk life, not copied from another, even though surrounding race. In his elevation of black folk forms, he succeeded as well or better than his contemporaries or any of those who have come after him. For he was conscious that America, that appeared to lie like a land of dreams, failed to justify its racial injustice inflicted upon the marginalized black Americans.
Centuries of oppression and segregation turned the Afro-Americans apathetic toward the prevalent set-up and, as a result, they tried to forge their true identity with Africa. This aspect of regressive vein of negritude in the heart and mind of the black Americans finds an expressive voice in the poetry of the first phase of Hughes’ literary career. Before discussing Hughes’ poems in some details, it is imperative to talk about the concept and theory of negritude that forms an indispensable part of the struggle and experiences of the Afro-Americans for relocation of their identity.

Negritude, in simple words, is the survival of the Negro identity in Afro-Americans that had been suppressed or overlaid by a false stereotype forced on them by the dehumanized conditions of slavery. In other words, it is that complex of traits, sensibilities, and historical consciousness of being a Negro that is peculiar to black Americans. Negritude as a term was first used by Leopold Senghor and meant “recognition of black identity and a corresponding pride in that identity -- or it could be a mystery of ever-more centripetal musing of African personality.” *(America in the Sixties* 245-46) In practice, however, the second implication dominates in Senghor’s formulations that regard Africa as the spiritual homeland of Afro-Americans. James A. Emanuel maintains that negritude is a “complex of traits, sensibilities, and historical consciousness peculiar to black Americans.” *(Berman 147)* In other words, it is to look into the fullness of the past without shame or fear, to take pride in being black, celebrating traditional African values and culture, and a mixing of an undercurrent of Marxist ideals.

A poet of negritude recognizes the significance of skin colour in his poetry and also the persistent and ever surviving rootedness in the tribal culture. Nathan Irvin
Huggins draws our attention to the larger meaning of negritude when he maintains that it is,

… to look into the fullness of the past without shame or fear. To be, and to relive the slave and the peasant and never be separated from that reality…to know and to accept slavery, the horror…the pain…the humiliation of it. To absorb it all, the living and dying past, as part of blood and breath. The Negro has to embrace the slave and the dwarf in himself. (Huggins 186-87)

Langston Hughes began his literary career after imbibing these aspects and characteristics of negritude and articulated the historical experiences of Afro-American people. His poetry carries a cadence of this enduring aspect of their primitive heritage. The poetic persona in his poems does not feel shy of referring himself to be a black. He celebrates himself and his primordial heritage that has become an irresistible part of his life. This, however, does not mean that Hughes does not include other dimensions of Negro identity in his poems. He, on the other hand, also refers to his affiliation to a distinctive community and the sense of exploitation and humiliation of his people as a subordinate class. He reflects the entire black community in his image like a devotee with an icon and merges his ego with the external reality or absorbs the reality in his own dormant body.

Hughes’ experiences with negritude, his socialist ideals, and his mature mind are reflected in several books devoted to his art and mind. Critics have highlighted how these varied perceptions of the writer got crystallized and find eloquent expression in his works. It has been very assiduously presented by the critics. Most of
these critical works, nonetheless, are derived, in one way or the other, from his two autobiographies and letters written to his kiths and kin. A brief look at these critical works would be in place to imbibe what the critics have highlighted and what they deliberately skipped having thought that such aspects need no serious attention.

*A Bio-Bibliography of Langston Hughes* (1967) is a fine book by Donald C. Dickinson that is divided into two parts. Part I portrays the life of Hughes up to 1965 and highlights his growth as a creative writer. The second part concerns with the bibliography pertaining to the art and craft of the writer. Calling Hughes “our bellwether in that early dawn” of Harlem renaissance, Arna Bontemps writes in the “Preface” that it would be too casual to merely observe that Hughes has been prolific. (ix) He has been “a minstrel and a troubadour in the classic sense” adds the friend, and had no other vocation and lived entirely by his writing. (x) His central purpose, argues Dickinson, remained constant -- “to interpret the living American Negro” and his writing is “a social document reflecting the various nuances of race relationships since 1920s.” (Bontemps 4)

James A. Emanuel’s *Langston Hughes* (1967) is a close study of a versatile and authentic writer and offers much to the mind and the sensibilities. To read Hughes, maintains the critic, “with sympathy and clear-sightedness opens door to regions still dim to our perceptions. The function of literature, and our special need, is to awaken such awareness. The author’s staple dream-deferred theme adjures us to arouse our democratic selves.”(4) The book includes a biographical and literary account of Hughes in order to provide a broad understanding of his achievement and experience in all genres. Arranged thematically, the chapters in the book analyze in depth his
most revealing works and attempt to establish the continuity of his purpose to explain and illuminate the conditions of Afro-Americans in the US.

*Langston Hughes: Black Genius* (1968) is an edited work that examines Hughes as a poet, novelist, short-story writer, translator and playwright. The editor, Thurman B. O’Daniel, hails Hughes as “one of the most talented and prolific American writers of the twentieth century.” (1) Arthur P. Davis praises Hughes’ objective portrayal of human actions arising out of racial bigotry in America. The critic adds that with a clear-eyed vision, Hughes, “a keen and tolerant observer,” possessed “deep insights and a profound knowledge of human nature” and expressed it in a simple and lucid language.” (20) He expressed what he himself experienced that makes his works authentic and readable.

Milton Meltzer’s *Langston Hughes: A Biography* (1968) records the productive life of the writer. From the beginning, Meltzer writes, Hughes tried to capture on paper the sound of the blues -- a hard thing to do, working with words alone. His work shows the life and experience of an Afro-American in the land where “white is right,” has always been different. His poetry voiced the condition of the black Americans and how they suffered in a Jim Crow America. He “listened closely,” says Meltzer, “and heard; he saw, and understood; he touched, and felt; he knew, and remembered.” (x)

Charlemae H. Rollins’ *Black Troubadour: Langston Hughes*, published in 1970, portrays Hughes as a real troubadour. A noble poet, Rollins maintains, Hughes had a serious understanding of life’s immense experiences and depicted them effectively in his works. He had a keen ear for common talk and attempted to catch exact rhythms of his people’s speech. He was a universal man, write Rollins,
“distilling from his own emotions a genuine interpretation of life, and from the emotions of his race a true picture of their gaiety as well as their hardships, deep religious feeling, and their frustrations and hopelessness.” (106)

Alice Walker’s *Langston Hughes: American Poet* is a biographical sketch of the poet in just 33 pages. Published in 1973, the book is written primarily for children and has illustrations at places that make it interesting. An artist that articulated the despondency of the Afro-Americans, Walker writes Hughes also shared the misery of other deprived sections of the American society. He wrote truthfully, she adds, about black Americans and showed that they were “beautiful, and sometimes ugly, like most people. He showed that they were sometimes happy and sometimes sad -- and that they could laugh even when they were feeling blue. He always thought this ability made them special.” (31-32)

Faith Berry’s *Good Morning Revolution: Uncollected Social Protest Writings by Langston Hughes* is an edited work that got published in 1973. This is a collection of poems, essays, and a story that presents the revolutionary aspect of Hughes’ art. Influenced by Marxist ideology, Hughes wrote radical pieces that can be taken as an open protest against racism and other discriminations prevalent in America. Nonetheless, Hughes, the editor writes, was hesitant to read and discuss these radical pieces openly. He was in dilemma as to what he wanted to write and what his people expected from him. By and large, maintains Faith Berry, these militant pieces “give expression to a vaunted, though still unattained, American ideal, and that their emotive characteristics communicate the wish, the hope, and the faith that were
Langston Hughes’s all along and that, indeed, inspired and were the themes of nearly all he wrote.” (10)

Jean Wagner’s *Black Poets of the United States* is a comprehensive study of the thematic concerns of the major black poets in American continent. Published in 1973, the book studies black poets from Paul Lawrence Dunbar to Langston Hughes and also touches upon black poetry and Harlem renaissance. Hughes, Wagner argues, was one of the authors who were primarily responsible for the renewed use of Negro popular literary forms and, at the same time, have been the main critics of Christian beliefs and have found their way to varying degrees of unbelief. Hughes is an original talent, argues Wagner, who was “uniquely successful in capturing every subtlety in the atavistic rhythms that characterized his race and in marshalling them to express poetically some of the most significant experiences of its life.” (385)

Onwuchekwa Jemie’s *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry* (1976) examines the latent sources of Hughes’ poetry and throws light on the method that one should adopt while reading the poet laureate of the Afro-American community. In the “Foreword” of the book, John Unterecker writes that Hughes “liked his art to the most vital black artists of his time -- the blues-singing, jazz-playing men and women whose voices could be heard on street corners, in slum bars, in a few night clubs, and, if you had good ears, in kitchens and bedrooms.” (x) Jemie also shows that Hughes is a master of creating the persona, opines Charles S., that becomes the representative voice of Afro-American community’s “endurance, its values, its humor; he holds up the mirror to its life. Thus Hughes exemplifies an older conception of the poet as the voice of society, the voice of his people.” (482)
Faith Berry’s *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond* is both a biographical and a critical narrative that touches upon major influences and experiences that shaped his literary sensibility. Published in 1983, the book attempts to place in perspective the man of letters and treats him in the context of his time. The book, writes Berry, is “the story of one of the most prolific and versatile American writers of his generation, who gained an international reputation and sustained it, at great odds, over four decades.” (*Langston: before and Beyond Harlem* xi)

Arnold Rampersad highlights myriad experiences of Langston Hughes’s life and art in his two voluminous biographies *viz.* *The Life of Langston Hughes*, Vol. I and Vol. II published in 1986 and 1988 respectively. The first volume *I, Too, Sing America*, depicts his life from his birth to 1941. The book is based upon the documents out of which distinctive biographies are supposed to be written. Beginning from the poet’s birth in 1902 to 1941, the itinerary, comments Kenny J. Williams, is designed to “re-interpret the relationship between Langston Hughes’ personal life and his art, between his concern for racial issues and his attempts to come to terms with the American Dream vs. the American Reality.” (447)

Vol. II, *I Dream a World*, focuses on Hughes’s life from World War II i.e. from 1941 to his death in 1967. He evaluates Langston Hughes in the socio-historical context of his time. He shows us how Langston Hughes was criticized by one and all for “Goodbye Christ” and how he was blamed as a radical socialist. *The Life of Langston Hughes*, Vol. I and II brings out the facts of Langston Hughes’s life which were not widely known earlier. These two books bring before us the man, his
associates, his environment, his experiences and his creative impulse that made
Hughes a distinctive figure in the twentieth century literary world.

*Langston Hughes and the Blues* (1988) by Steven C. Tracy begins with a
discussion of Hughes’ literary aims and practices in relation to the Harlem renaissance
of the 1920s. It, then, explores the development of a body of attitudes toward the folk
roots of Afro-American culture that rose to importance with this movement and its
major leaders. Tracy opines that there is “not really a steady development of direction
in Hughes’ blues poems from volume to volume regarding the use of stanzas or the
sex of the speaker in the poems, but there are some differences among the blues that
he wrote at various times over the years.” (*Langston Hughes: The Man* 3) Tracy’s
attempt to trace the variations that Hughes applies in his blues poems in his poetic
career makes the book unique and an important work of objective criticism.

attempts to reconsider the complex patterns of meaning in the literary imagination of
the poet, especially as they complement and displace each other, including the genres
that contain them and the creative strategies that set them into play. Miller inquires
into the voice and signature of Hughes as well as the narrator in his literary world.
Representing the poet as the “voice of beauty and wisdom,” Hughes’ imagination, like
S.T. Coleridge, was “not an act of memory or fancy [but] the ordering power that
defined itself in its own light.” (3)

*Langston Hughes: The Man, His Art, and His Continuing Influence* is a
collection of essays by different Hughes’ scholars that discuss the artist in relation to
his art -- poetry, essays, short stories, and plays. Edited by C. James Trotman and
Emery Wimbish and published in 1995, the book treats Hughes in relation to Harlem Renaissance and in the purview of race, culture, and gender. The book is a tribute to a singer who sang of Afro-Americans and, with the power of his writings and ideas influenced the present and future generations. Hughes was “a peripatetic artist,” writes Trotman, who, uses language “as a creative source for drawing with exquisite clarity and compassion the lives, manners, and customs of black folk.” (4)

*The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* is an indispensable book for those who wish to study Hughes’ poems in entirety. Edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel, the book came out in 1995 and became, what Tish Dash argues, “a treasure trove” (*Collected Poems* 35) for an admirer of Hughes. Arranged in the chronological order, the poems reveal his outspoken, “down-to-earth, delighting in the cadences and diction of Afro-American song and speech [his] vision of America is in many ways as timely today as in the decades in which [they] were written.” (*Collected Poems* Jacket cover)

*A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*, published in 2004, attempts to relate Hughes and his works in the contemporary scenario. Edited by Steven C. Tracy, the book has a brief biographical account of Hughes by R. Baxter Miller followed by the poet’s literary use of place by James De Jongh. While Steven C. Tracy deals Hughes in relation to Afro-American vernacular music, Joyce A. Joyce discusses him in the purview of twentieth-century gender racial issues, and James Smethurst highlights Hughes’ adventure as a social poet and his journey from the popular front to the black power. “Exploring and affirming the Pan-African component,” maintains the editor, “of the human experience, particularly the Afro-American dimension of the American
“experiment” was the aim of Hughes’ entire artistic harvest that implicitly rejected the “social and literary pretentiousness that divided the Afro-American lower and upper classes, emphasizing a commonality of colonialized experiences that united -- or should have united -- darker peoples in America and around the world.” (A Historical Guide 16)

When the varied experiences of the poet are considered there is no agreement on the kind of perspective the poet has in his treatment of the shared experience of the Afro-Americans nor is there any consensus about aspects of this experience which receive primary emphasis in his poetry. We have already seen that there are critics like Milton Meltzer, Jean Wagner, Tish Dash and Calvin Hernton who see him primarily as a poet of negritude emphasizing the ethnic identity of the Afro-American community and considering only the primordial heritage of myths, legends and folklore brought from their African homeland as their authentic legacy. Other critics like Saunders Redding and Faith Berry see him as a radical voice asserting the right of the Afro-Americans for a dignified place in American society and claiming all the privileges due to them as citizens. Some other critics like Onwuchekwa Jemie, Raymond Smith and James A. Emanuel see him as an ardent humanist who experiences the problems of the Afro-American chiefly as an instance of modern man’s predicament in twentieth-century industrial society without putting any exclusionist emphasis on the racial factors. All these versions of the treatment of the Afro-Americans can be supported by some evidence from the writer’s poems and may partially be true. It is, however, not easy to reconcile them into a coherent and consistent outlook. However in the present research work, a major poet like Langston
Hughes is not seen as adopting ad-hoc and shifting approaches. In fact the primary concern of the present study is to discover and define the underlying coherence of the world outlook of Langston Hughes as a creative writer. An allied area of enquiry is to study the shifts and changes which take place in his treatment of Afro-American experience and his understanding of their predicament at different stages of his poetic career. The underlying assumption is that these shifts and changes are not arbitrary but interconnected as integral aspects of a unified world-outlook. Of course this requires a division of his total poetic output into distinctive stages of a developing process. The central concerns of Langston Hughes remain the same, only some emphases change leading to some particular concerns gaining primacy and other receding into the background at different points of time. In the proposed research work, for the sake of convenience, the poetic career of Langston Hughes has been divided into three distinctive phases. Through a close analysis of some of the more important poems written during each phase, the salient features of the treatment Langston Hughes gave to Afro-American experience in each one of these phases will be defined and discussed. Furthermore, attention will be paid to the basic factors which provide the logic for shifts in emphasis given to different facets of this experience.

Langston Hughes gave a powerful expression to the rich and complex experience of the Afro-Americans which had earlier remained buried under the stereotyped images thrust on them and seemingly interiorized by them as a strategy of survival. Hughes shows a tremendous capacity to identify with the collective personality of the Afro-Americans given to them by their total historical existence in the American society. He articulated their innermost urges and their persistent
suffering. He spoke in a vein which looked authentically theirs and in an idiom which carried the stamp of their shared creativity. His poetry is marked by simplicity and directness, bespeaking of his complete identification with the people whose experiences he is recording. He presents the world of his people in its positivity, underscoring their strength, grit and ability to survive. Occasionally, his poetry falls into a nostalgic vein as he tries to capture their warm African past. But to understand and analyze such past and its experiences the psychoanalytical approach comes to our rescue. It logically and plausibly makes us understand the psychology of the black race that not only lost its glorious history but also its identity. When Sigmund Freud developed the techniques of psychoanalysis and elaborated his ideas, no one thought that his ideas will so much influence various disciplines. John Varghese explains Freud’s pleasure principle which governs all psychic activities and all other activities prompted by this wish for pleasure. (48) The blacks in America have been denied of pleasure of any kind be it political, economic, social or spiritual. The effort by every black writer (in fact by any writer writing for the cause of the blacks) is to export the blacks to such a situation where there will be no room for tears and fear. It is in this regard that the psychoanalytic criticism becomes all the more relevant in understanding the black writers in general and Langston Hughes in particular. Our unconscious is a storehouse of all unfulfilled desires or traumatic past events and experiences that are forced out of the conscious-preconscious into the realm of the unconscious. This storehouse of traces has a strong influence on all human beings. It governs all our thoughts, actions, experiences, vocabulary or the spoken word.
Consequently when such repressed feelings are sublimated, they become noble and great.

A leading figure in Harlem renaissance, Hughes was the most prominent Afro-American poet of the twentieth century who sang of myriad experiences of his people and became “an outspoken critic of racism and segregationist policies” prevalent in the United States of America. (Meltzer xii) In his poetry, Hughes strove to speak to, as well as, for the black masses while still making a living from his writing, which meant attracting white audiences, as well. One of his major innovations was to incorporate the Afro-American vernacular and cultural traditions, including the rhythms of black music, into his poetry.

The chapters that follow put due emphasis on the multi-dimensional experiences inherited, imbibed and expressed by Langston Hughes in his poetry. There exists a strong relationship between the literature and the social milieu in which it is produced. Although the development of America as a nation was, from the beginning, a conscious adaptation of older European cultural patterns to a frontier civilization yet the unusual role played by the blacks in its development and progress can never be obliterated. That is why the second chapter of the present thesis discusses history of blacks and their slow but certain development especially in the literary fields.

The third chapter covers the nostalgic phase of his treatment of Afro-American experience which broadly coincided with the Harlem Renaissance of 1920s. Through a critical analysis of some of the more important poems of this period, attempt has been made to understand the exact meaning of negritude which figures out
quite prominently in the poetry of this period. The tentative assumption which has been tested and authenticated through the discussion of poems is that the stress on African roots does not have the character of a regressive impulse but is an attempt to recoup and recover the dignity and rich humanity of the Afro-Americans lying buried under the Jim Crow stereotypes imposed on them.

The fourth chapter covers the experiences of 1930s and a part of the 1940s when the poet was supposed to have been under the influence of Marxist ideology and was writing poetry of radical protest. Through a detailed analysis of poems of this period an attempt has been made to indicate that his treatment of the experience of Afro-American community during this period is within the framework of a liberal progressive outlook which forms an integral part of his ideology of American dream widely accepted in the society at large. The Marxist overtones do not indicate adoption of the outlook of scientific socialism. In fact his poetry becomes international which aims to preserve and transcend the categories of race and nation in order to overcome the fragmentation of global working class struggles. The poet of this period forces us to rethink the historical relationships between poetics and politics.

The fourth chapter tries to unearth the Afro-American’s experiences of the last phase where the poet tries to forge a new future for his race. The poet’s tone here becomes moderate; the anger and protest disappear and the primary focus falls on harmonious co-presence of various ethnicities in a multiracial society where due recognition is given to each particular strand in the general transactions and governance of the society. The poet once again tries to relocate the self of his poetic
persona and advocates the harmonious co-presence of all ethnicities. The universality and transcendence turns the poet into a poet of the masses.

In the end there are comments on the world-outlook of Hughes as a poet and how he has contributed in the struggle of self of Afro-Americans and other ethnicities in their realization of the essence of life.