

**AN ARTIST IN MAKING: *NOT WITHOUT LAUGHTER*, BY
LANGSTON HUGHES**

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Abstract

Langston Hughes is often regarded as the flag bearer of the Harlem Renaissance, with his life events deeply shaping his literary works. His diverse portfolio includes essays, short stories, operettas, children's books, poems, and plays, all of which celebrate the spirit of the African-American community and reflect the realities of Black life. Among his most notable works, his autobiographical novel *Not Without Laughter* (1930) stands out as a powerful portrayal of America at a pivotal moment in history. The novel explores complex themes of family, community, identity, and creativity within their social and racial contexts. Through its protagonist, *Not Without Laughter* offers a nuanced view of African-American life, capturing both its struggles and artistic expressions against the backdrop of racial adversity. Reading Hughes in conjunction with the story of his own life provides a richer understanding of the motivations behind his writing and the broader objectives of his work. It also highlights Hughes' significance as a key figure in American culture, whose writings embody the soul of the nation's artistic and social landscape

Keywords: Langston Hughes, jazz age, Harlem Renaissance, American Dream, black literature, Autobiographical fiction

James Mercer Langston Hughes (1902-1967), an acclaimed poet, writer, dramatist, and social activist, shaped African-American literature and the Harlem Renaissance. He was born on February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. In childhood, his parents split and he lived with his mother and grandmother. His grandmother's love of storytelling and African-American folklore shaped his early literary and cultural tastes. Hughes, while young relocated frequently owing to his mother's employment, exposing him to numerous US areas and cultures. Hughes temporarily attended Columbia University in 1921 but departed due to racism. He visited Africa and Europe before returning to America. He brought a wide array of experiences to his work. Before he turned twelve, he had already lived in six different

American cities. By the time Hughes was 24, his first poetry collection, *The Weary Blues* (Knopf, 1926), was published. In those early years, he had worked a variety of jobs: truck farmer, cook, waiter, college graduate, sailor, and nightclub door attendant in Paris, while also traveling to Mexico, West Africa, the Azores, the Canary Islands, Holland, France, and Italy. These diverse experiences and encounters profoundly shaped his worldview and artistic voice. Four years later, his debut novel, *Not Without Laughter*, earned the Harmon Gold Award for Literature. Hughes described his writing as focusing on individuals who are involved in hard labor, vocal performers, and those navigating the challenges of seeking work in a racially divided America.

Langston Hughes was not bereft of parents; however, Arnold Rampersad notes in his biography of Hughes, “in some respects, he grew up a motherless and fatherless child, who never forgot the hurts of his childhood” (Rampersad, *Sing America* 1:3). “Sisterless and brotherless as well, Hughes was shuttled around among relatives, infrequently with his mother, hating his father, and being raised without much warmth by his grandmother” (Bloom 166). He was dedicated to utilizing his writing to illuminate society's racial conflict, particularly the African-American experience in the US. In the early to mid-20th century, his writings addressed and challenged racial injustice in American culture by speaking about the African-American experience in a way that connected with the common people. He wrote about African Americans' daily problems, pleasures, and grief sympathetically and honestly. He praised African-American culture.

Hughes' work captures the lives of those enduring periods of instability—people who might be employed one week and fired the next, beaten down yet resolute in their will to persevere. His characters navigate the struggles of purchasing furniture on an installment plan, renting out rooms to make ends meet, dreaming of a new suit for Easter, and pawning that suit by the Fourth of July. *I, Too, Sing America*, one of Hughes' most powerful poems, embodies this resilience, expressing a deep yearning for equality while challenging the notion that patriotism is confined by race. First published in March 1925 as part of a special edition of *Survey Graphic* titled *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro*, the poem speaks to the perseverance and dignity of African Americans in the face of adversity.

The Harlem Renaissance wouldn't be the same without Langston Hughes; they're practically one and the same. The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural explosion, especially

in the creative arts, and it marked one of the most influential periods in African-American literature. From essays to operettas, children's books to poems, Hughes had a hand in it all, proving that his talent knew no limits. He honored the richness of Black life, capturing its pain and joy at a time when other artists were reluctant to explore Black experiences for fear of fueling racial stereotypes. Hughes aimed to tell the authentic stories of his people, embracing both their suffering and their love for music, laughter, and language. He is also hailed as a pioneer of jazz poetry, with many of his poems reflecting the rhythms, meter, and musicality of blues, jazz, and African-American spirituals.

Hughes felt literature and art could influence society. He inspired readers to resist racial inequity through his words. He often inspired readers to imagine a fairer America. Hughes depicted African Americans as multidimensional, varied people with hopes, aspirations, and feelings during a period when mainstream media devalued and dehumanized them. He tried to humanize his characters. His efforts promoted racial and ethnic sensitivity and understanding. He wanted readers to experience the world through African-American eyes to foster empathy and cooperation.

Not Without Laughter is a coming-of-age tale about a young African American child in early 20th-century segregated America. Family, community, identity, and art and creativity in social and racial issues are explored in the story. The novel depicts the complicated and multidimensional African-American experience during a key moment in American history via its protagonist. In the 1920s, Harlem was the birthplace of the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural and creative movement that profoundly influenced the development of the novel. *Not Without Laughter* borrows from Hughes's life. Hughes, born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902, traveled frequently as a youngster, seeing many US areas and cultures. His grandmother's stories and love of African-American folklore shaped his worldview and artistic sense. *Not Without Laughter* explores African Americans' social, cultural, and economic struggles in the early 20th century under racial segregation and prejudice. The story shows how art, creativity, music, and the close-knit African-American society help its protagonists, especially Sandy, overcome these problems. The novel's description of African American existence, the study of identity, and the depiction of artistic expression amid racial adversity make it significant.

Creative and imaginative thinking shaped various characters and the tale. Novel characters communicate emotions via creativity and imagination. They express their

emotions via music, storytelling, poetry, and painting. African-American culture and legacy are preserved via folklore, storytelling, and art. Characters use creativity to preserve their cultures. They teach their children their history, morals, and knowledge via storytelling and song. Aspirations for a better future are represented by creativity and imagination. Sandy wants to be a writer, while Jimboy wants to be a musician. Dreams motivate and give meaning to their existence. Novel characters challenge social standards by expressing themselves via art. "I don't care if we are poor. We're not white trash. I'm not going to be nobody's nigger (Hughes, *Not without Laughter* 144)." The tale shows how creative creativity and imagination may survive and thrive through Sandy. "I'm gonna be a great man someday. Just like Booker T. Washington (Hughes, *Not without Laughter* 242)." Sandy escapes his racially separated society through fantasy. His art lets him escape his tough upbringing and explore a different universe. "The doors of the house opened into the same old gray and wind-torn street. But not in Sandy's imagination. Sandy's imagination had a street all its own (Hughes, *Not without Laughter* 132)." Sandy expresses himself via writing and storytelling. Imagination can change lives. His dreams reflect hope for a brighter future and the potential of defying social norms.

Sandy wants to be a writer to define himself on his terms. This goal rejects African Americans' restricted responsibilities in a racially separated society. His future? He was going to be a great writer. He was going to compose poems that made tears flow to his eyes. He was going to be renowned. Sandy's work challenges African-American stereotypes. He breaks social standards, showing that African Americans have varied abilities and objectives. Sandy's writing and dreams strengthen their belonging. He uses his work to preserve and celebrate Afro-American culture and his personal experiences. "And so the stories that Sandy wrote were the stories of coloured people (Hughes, *Not without Laughter* 127)." In a culture with little prospects for African Americans, his desire to write shows confidence in a better future. "Sandy realized that he was not like other people. He could not get away from what he felt, but he did not want to. He was going to be a writer" (Hughes, *Not without Laughter* 149).

The black community though racially separated, stays together and supports each other. Aunt Hager, Jimboy, and Harriett nurture and raise their children together. They bring stability and affection to a difficult planet. In addition to family relationships, the tale shows community bonds. Characters participate in social and cultural events with neighbours,

friends, and community members. Common experiences and struggles underlie these bonds. Cultural and religious celebrations are common among African Americans in the novel. They maintain their traditions and strengthen their identity and togetherness. Church and community events are important in the story. When characters experience economic hardship or prejudice, the community frequently provides emotional and practical support. Solidarity helps people overcome life's problems. The protagonists reject bigotry by sharing their stories and supporting one another, strengthening their common identity.

In times of trouble, this group shares tales, music, and a strong feeling of community that helps them overcome obstacles. It provides comfort in times of trouble. Community rallies around characters facing economic challenges, racial persecution, or personal struggles. They offer emotional and practical assistance, a safety net. The block's neighbors flocked to Hager's help. She was never alone. Someone was always coming in or leaving out. They pitied her, because life had been harsh, and wanted to offer her some sympathy. Storytelling, music, and culture unite the neighbourhood. These commonalities allow the characters to express themselves, share their background, and form a bond. "They sang together, laughed, told stories, recited anecdotes, and gossiped. The laughter and talking was endless" (Hughes, *Not without Laughter* 177). Despite their struggles, this sense of belonging provides the characters with a solid basis and purpose. Langston Hughes was lauded for depicting the African-American community as strong and resilient. Unity and empowerment are reflected in the community's ability to share and assist one another. African Americans survived racially separated society by their common identity and customs, according to the novel. Hughes' depiction of the community's resistance also shows African Americans' endurance and drive in the early 20th century, a time of racial discrimination and inequity.

In the novel *Not Without Laughter*, education is fundamental to empowerment. The story shows how education may help characters, particularly African Americans, grow, self-realize, and empower. The novel depicts education as empowering. It gives them the chance to question prejudices, learn new things, and improve their life. Education helps characters overcome racial prejudice and bigotry. They may prove themselves and defy preconceptions by thriving in school. They claimed that a person of colour needed extensive knowledge to advance. He endeavoured to reach a destination. Education fosters self-realization. Education helps characters like Sandy find their strengths and interests, deepening their self-

understanding. "Sandy realized that he was not like other people. He could not get away from what he felt, but he did not want to. He was going to be a writer. (Hughes, *Not without Laughter* 198)." Education drives characters. They study to overcome their situations and accomplish their aspirations. He had the potential to become an accomplished author. He intended to compose poetry that evoked emotional responses akin to weeping. He was destined for fame. The community invests in its children because of its commitment to empowering them through education.

Sandy learned to read at school. Then he learned the world was bigger than his block and few streets. Education helps Sandy and Annjee overcome biases. They demonstrate African Americans' academic success via school. Sandy worked hard in school because they believed a brown person had to know a lot to succeed. They were trying to go someplace. Economic growth is linked to education. Characters empower themselves via education. Sandy develops his passion for writing and literary ambitions in school. Sandy recognized he was unique. He could not escape his feelings, but he did not want to. His goal was to write. Education and Sandy-like personalities are valued. Education investment indicates community resistance to racial disparity. All youngsters attended Sunday and day schools in the same facility. Parents ensured that. In *Not Without Laughter*, characters fight racial oppression with knowledge. They empower themselves, question prejudices, and use education to enhance their lives and futures. Education's transformative power against racism is stressed. The novel's heroes understand that education can improve their lives, fight inequity, and improve their community. Sandy, Annjee, and others study for career and financial security. Annjee believed that employment could be preferable to housekeeping. She desired for Sandy to receive an education. She was incapable of perceiving an alternative for him.

In the novel, the protagonists overcome racial discrimination. The author's ingenuity, aspirations, and resilience defy racial preconceptions. Breaking preconceptions and revealing African Americans' diverse experiences, ambitions, and agency, the story embraces their humanity. Hughes effectively challenges his time's racial prejudices in *Not Without Laughter* and supports the idea that people should be defined by their character and objectives, not their colour. He uses well-rounded African-American characters to dispel racial stereotypes. Sandy has qualities, experiences, and objectives not limited by race. This smart young man loves reading and writing. His research challenges the idea that African

Americans are illiterate and do not want to learn. Annjee, Sandy's mother, has defied stereotypes. A hardworking parent who wants to provide her child with a better future through education and work. Anne favoured work more than housework. Her goal was Sandy's education. She couldn't see anything else for him.

Harriett, Sandy's grandmother, is deeply religious and loving, demonstrating African-American faith and spirituality. Her tenacity and endurance as an African-American matriarch defy stereotypes. Sandy's father, Jimboy, is a skilled musician who embodies the novel's subject of artistic expression. His music defies prejudices by displaying African-American talent. Jimboy looked at her, and he smiled. His words were limited. "They sang together, laughed, told stories, recited anecdotes, and gossiped. The laughter and talking was endless" (Hughes, *Not without Laughter* 82). These characters show the diversity of African American backgrounds, goals, and skills, emphasizing that people should not be labelled. Hughes' well-rounded characters question his era's prejudiced prejudices and reflect African-American depth and diversity.

Many characters express themselves via art throughout the story. Jimboy expresses himself through music, whereas Sandy writes poetry about himself. Characters in the story utilize art and self-expression to fight racial stereotypes and biases. They resist society's one-dimensional depictions via creativity. Jimboy's music defies African-American creative preconceptions. They use their history, legends, and customs to stand up against racial injustice and preserve their identity. Their identity and fight against racism are expressed via community gatherings, storytelling, and music. Self-expression and art improve resilience and empowerment. Under racial discrimination, characters find power in their creativity and claim their freedom to express themselves. Characters reflect on their background, strengths, and shortcomings via art to embrace themselves. The story depicts identification as a kind of resistance against racism's degrading effects. This search for identification defies racial prejudice and discrimination that reduced people to stereotypes. The novel's examination of this issue is a profound statement on African Americans' perseverance, say scholars and reviewers.

Scholars say the work acknowledges the significance of heritage celebration as a means of asserting one's individuality. The protagonists' cultural pride resists attempts to erase their history. The novel's protagonists band together to affirm their humanity and fight racial injustice as they search for identity. Their common experiences and support networks

fuel collective resistance. Critics say the work serves to reinforce the resiliency and collective agency of the African-American Community. The characters' collective resistance shows the community's power. Music and literature are utilized to fight prejudice. Jimboy and Sandy use their creativity to fight prejudices, express themselves, and defy society. Hughes depict art is a way of "combatting dehumanization." The characters utilize art to overcome racial constraints. The novel shows how art may withstand racism's degrading consequences.

Hughes is praised for his strong depiction of African Americans who, in their search for identity, show tenacity, fortitude, and the will to affirm their humanity in the face of racial intolerance. Hope and persistence are fundamental to his writings. The novel's remarkable representation of optimism and perseverance shows the human spirit's tenacity. In difficult situations, characters like Sandy and Annjee show extraordinary tenacity. With tenacity, they overcome economic obstacles, racial prejudice, and personal struggles to improve their lives and realize their aspirations. The individual tenacity of the characters is a potent symbol of the human spirit. Hughes depicts people who aspire for a brighter future despite their hardships. Hope and perseverance transcend beyond individual personalities to the African-American community. The characters help one another by providing strength in times of need. The novel demonstrates that community fortitude can effectively counteract the dehumanizing consequences of prejudice. Whether Sandy wants to write or Annjee wants to improve her son's life, their ambitions indicate a belief in conquering their obstacles. The characters' optimistic aspirations for the future function as a guiding light amidst the obscurity. Hughes' depiction of these goals shows African Americans' endurance and drive during a difficult period. Even in the face of racism and poverty, the novel's characters don't give up. Hughes' portrayal of hope and resilience resists oppressive forces that seek to diminish African Americans' humanity.

Finding joy, love, and beauty in life resists forces that aim to dehumanize them. Even under pressure, the novel's characters find delight. They laugh, sing, and celebrate life's simple and small pleasures, showing their resilience and refusal to be defined by racism "They sang together, laughed, told stories, recited anecdotes, and gossiped" (Hughes, *Not without Laughter* 134). In the house, there was love, respect, understanding, warmth, security, and laughter. The characters appreciate nature, music, and art. The protagonists avoid sadness by appreciating beauty and hope. Recognizing their strengths, they fight

racism's damaging effects. Collective resilience is a formidable defence against threats to their humanity. "On these block parties, church outings, or birthdays and anniversaries in the church, everybody seemed to belong to everybody else" (Hughes, *Not without Laughter* 146). The characters' capacity to discover hope, joy, love, and beauty repels prejudice. They demonstrate the persistence of the human spirit and the tenacity of coloured communities during a difficult time in American history. The narrative stresses savouring life's positives and building relationships to fight racial prejudice. This shows the resilience and hope of the human spirit in the fight against prejudice.

Ultimately, Langston Hughes's exploration of the literary realm had a lasting impact. His writings, distinguished by a distinctive fusion of artistic expression and critical analysis of society, have profoundly influenced the trajectory of American literature and cultural dialogue. The everlasting appeal of Hughes is evidence of the universality of his ideas and the eternal impact of his words. Amidst the difficulties of the present and our aspirations for the future, Langston Hughes's influence serves as a guiding principle, compelling us to actively confront the intricacies of our collective human existence and strive for a fairer and more comprehensive global society. In Rebecca Carey Rohan words:

Langston Hughes was an innovator...Whether he was writing poetry or prose, musicals or magazine articles, he wrote about everyone in black society, with a focus on the common man and his everyday struggles. He wanted to uplift the condition of his people, raise racial consciousness and cultural nationalism, and shout to the rooftops that they should have pride in their diversity. Perhaps because equality has not been achieved, and racism still exists in America, his work still resonates today. (115)

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