

DRAMATIZATION
a story based on
true events

Readers Theater Play

LANGSTON HUGHES



A Biography in Poems

BY KRISTIN LEWIS

CHARACTERS

*NARRATORS 1, 2, and 3 (N1, N2, N3)

*OLD LANGSTON HUGHES

*POEM READERS 1, 2, and 3
(PR1, PR2, PR3)

CHORUS: all poem readers together

*LANGSTON HUGHES

GRANDMOTHER

TAYLOR: a classmate

LUELLA: a classmate

CARRIE HUGHES: Langston's mom

SARTUR: Langston's best friend

JAMES HUGHES: Langston's dad
FRIEND

REPORTERS 1, 2, and 3

* Starred characters are major roles.

A scene from the Harlem
Renaissance, from the book
Harlem Stomp!

POEM EXCERPTS FROM THE COLLECTED POEMS OF
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TURN THE PAGE to read
Langston's amazing story.





AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT:
Feeling Like an Outsider

Why does Langston Hughes feel like an outsider?
How does he deal with these feelings?

PROLOGUE

N1: Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902.

N2: When he was just a baby, his father divorced his mother and moved to Mexico. Soon after, Langston's mom left him too, traveling from city to city looking for work.

N3: Langston spent most of his childhood under the care of his poor and elderly grandmother.

OLD LANGSTON: I was consumed by a left-lonesome feeling. I did not understand why my family didn't seem to want me.

SCENE 1

When I'm Lonely

PR1: *Sometimes when I'm lonely,
Don't know why,
Keep thinkin' I won't be lonely*

CHORUS: *By and by.*

N1: It's dusk on a warm summer night in Lawrence, Kansas. Langston, 7, and his grandmother sit on the front porch.

N2: Across the street, some boys are playing with a ball.

LANGSTON: Please, can I play with them?

GRANDMOTHER: Remember what happened yesterday?

LANGSTON: Those were other kids.

N3: Living in a mostly white neighborhood, Langston experiences constant **discrimination**.

GRANDMOTHER: Those white children threw rocks at you! They called you hateful names! I will not allow you to be treated that way.

LANGSTON: But—

GRANDMOTHER: Don't you know that you are the grandson of great men? Your grandfather and I helped

slaves escape on the Underground Railroad. We risked our lives for freedom.

LANGSTON: If I'm so important, why can't I wear normal shoes, instead of your **castoffs**?

GRANDMOTHER: Your shoes are clean and neat. That is all that matters. Besides, we can't afford it.

LANGSTON: Kids at school laugh at me.

N1: The boys across the street are ending their game. The setting sun casts long shadows, making the boys seem taller than they are.

GRANDMOTHER: Be proud of who you are, Langston. Don't let anyone tell you that you don't matter.

N2: In 1915, Langston's grandmother dies. He is taken in by neighbors.

PR1: *Keep thinkin' I won't be lonely*

CHORUS: *By and by.*



Langston, around age 12, in Lawrence, Kansas

AP IMAGES

SCENE 2

This Is What I See

PR2: *I look at the world*

From awakening eyes in a black face—

And this is what I see:

CHORUS: *This fenced-off narrow space
Assigned to me.*

N3: Seventh grade is miserable for Langston. He misses his mom. He misses his grandmother.

N1: And **Jim Crow laws**—that is, racist laws that **segregate** black and white Americans—are taking hold in Kansas.

N2: Langston can't even go to his favorite movie house anymore. A new sign outside the theater reads "Whites Only."

N3: One day, Langston shows a couple of his classmates an announcement about a Children's Day party.

LANGSTON: Look, it says there will be a Ferris wheel!

TAYLOR: The entire town is going!

LUELLA (*pointing*): Langston, didn't you see this part?

LANGSTON (*reading*): "Black children will have no desire to attend. This is a social event, and everyone in town knows what that means."

OLD LANGSTON: I knew exactly what that meant.

I thought of my grandmother, of her pride, and my heart filled with resentment.

N1: Recess starts. Langston stays at his desk, writing **feverishly**.

LUELLA: Are you writing another poem?

TAYLOR: Can we read it?

LANGSTON: It's not ready.

TAYLOR: Come on. We're going outside to race, and you're the fastest kid in the class.

LANGSTON: What would be the point? I am not allowed to compete in any of the track meets with you. White students only, remember?

PR2: *And this is what I see:*

CHORUS: *This fenced-off narrow space
Assigned to me.*



During Langston's life, signs like this one, in Hampton, Virginia, appeared all over the South.

SCENE 3

All of Your Dreams

PR3: *Bring me all of your dreams, you dreamer . . .*

That I may wrap them in a blue cloud-cloth

CHORUS: *Away from the too-rough fingers of the world.*

N2: A year later, Langston's mom finally comes for him. They move to Cleveland, Ohio.

N3: Langston is overjoyed that at last, he has a family and a home.

N1: He goes to Central High School, where the students don't have the same racial prejudices that students at his middle school had. He loves it there.

OLD LANGSTON: But as always in my young life, happiness was **fleeting**.

N2: One day, he finds his mom packing a suitcase.

CARRIE: We're moving to Chicago. I think I can get a better job there.

LANGSTON: But I have friends here. And one of my poems is going to be published in the newspaper. And I just won first place in high jump!

CARRIE: Stay then, if you like it so much.

LANGSTON: I could rent a room somewhere with the money I've earned delivering papers.

CARRIE: That's fine but when you're 16, you will come to Chicago and get a job.





During the Harlem Renaissance, Harlem was a vibrant place that inspired many of Langston's poems.

LANGSTON: But what about college? What about becoming a poet?

CARRIE: I had dreams too when I was your age, but dreams don't put food on the table.

PR3: *Wrap them in a blue cloud-cloth*

CHORUS: *Away from the too-rough fingers of the world.*

SCENE 4

A Dream Deferred

PR1: *What happens to a dream deferred?*

CHORUS: *Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?*

N2: Langston is 16 and barely getting by on his own. He walks with his best friend Sartur.

SARTUR: So, what do you want to do after graduation?

LANGSTON: Mom wants me to go to Chicago, but I want to go to New York City. Writers, artists, blues singers—creative black men and women are moving to Harlem. They say it's a **renaissance**. A Harlem Renaissance.

SARTUR: And what will you do?

LANGSTON: I'll turn my poems into bread.

SARTUR: Hey, speaking of food, come to dinner at my house. You're looking really skinny.

N3: It's true. Langston has been surviving on rice.

LANGSTON (*grinning*): OK.

N1: When Langston gets home, he is overcome with uncertainty. He stands in the **shabby** room he is renting and looks at the stack of half-written poems on his desk.

N2: He closes his eyes and tries to dream of Harlem, to hear the music, to picture the lights of the city. But it all seems so far away.

N3: So impossibly far away.

PR1: *What happens to a dream deferred?*

CHORUS: *Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?*

SCENE 5

Dream Dust

PR2: *Gather out of Star-dust, Storm-dust, Earth-dust, Cloud-dust, and splinters of hail, One handful of dream-dust*

CHORUS: *Not for sale.*

N1: Langston gets an invitation from his father to spend the summer with him in Mexico. They haven't seen each other in 10 years, and Langston is excited.

N2: But when he arrives, things are not as he expected.

OLD LANGSTON: My father was a cruel man. He was rich, yet never sent my mother a dime. He was an **affluent** rancher, but he treated his workers very poorly. All he cared about was money.

JAMES: I'm sending you to study engineering in Germany. Then you will come work for me.

LANGSTON: What?!

JAMES: There is no future in America. In Europe, the color of your skin won't matter.

LANGSTON: But I'm terrible at math!

JAMES: Do you want to be like your mom, waiting tables your whole life? Don't you want to *get* anywhere?

LANGSTON: Yes . . . I want to be a writer.

JAMES: Is there . . . money in that?

LANGSTON: Not yet. But I've already been published.

JAMES: Seems silly.

LANGSTON: People *need* poetry.

JAMES: OK. I'll send you anywhere you want—if you study engineering.

LANGSTON: I want to go to Columbia. That's in Harlem.

PR2: *One handful of dream-dust*

CHORUS: *Not for sale.*

SCENE 6

Our World Anew

PR3: *All you who are dreamers, too,
Help me to make*

Our world anew.

CHORUS: *I reach out my dreams to you.*

N3: When Langston steps off the subway in Harlem,

he is overwhelmed.

OLD LANGSTON: I had never seen so many people who looked like me. I wanted to stop and talk to everyone.

N1: Langston soon realizes he'd rather spend his time going to plays and jazz clubs than to class.

OLD LANGSTON: I loved Harlem, but I did not fit in at Columbia. I needed to travel, to see the world.

N2: Langston drops out of Columbia and gets a job on a boat. He travels to many places—Africa, France, Italy.

OLD LANGSTON: In every port I wondered, will I belong here?

N3: After a year abroad, Langston moves to Washington, D.C., where his mom is living. He gets a job as a busboy in a hotel—the only job he can get.

N1: One day, he walks to work with a friend.

LANGSTON: I might get fired.

FRIEND: What do you mean?

LANGSTON: Vachel Lindsay came to the hotel last night.

FRIEND: The famous poet?

LANGSTON: Yep. I slipped a few of my poems under his dinner plate.

FRIEND: Bold move.

LANGSTON: I know. I'm worried he might not like them, or he might tell the boss.

N2: As they turn the corner, they see a huge crowd gathered outside the hotel.

REPORTER 1 (pointing): There he is!

REPORTER 2: Langston Hughes!

N3: A mob of journalists rushes toward them. Cameras flash.

LANGSTON: What is going on?

REPORTER 3: Don't you know?

N1: The reporter hands Langston a newspaper. **LANGSTON (reading):** "Last night, I discovered a new poet, Langston Hughes. This talented young man is, without a doubt, going to be an important literary voice."

REPORTER 1: Mr. Lindsay wrote that about you.

REPORTER 2: You're famous!

REPORTER 3: Give us a quote, will ya?

REPORTER 1: Where do you get your inspiration?



In the 1920s, fashionable young women like these were called "flappers." Langston celebrated their beauty in his poem "Harlem Sweeties."



LANGSTON: Uh, um. I get it from everything around me. From the low-down folks I've known all my life. Those who find the strength to go on, even when the whole world is stacked against them.

REPORTER 2: Hey, that's a nice line.

LANGSTON: Thank you.

REPORTER 3: So what are your plans?

LANGSTON: My plans?

N2: A smile spreads across his face.

LANGSTON: I'm going back to Harlem.

PR3: *Help me to make
Our world anew.*

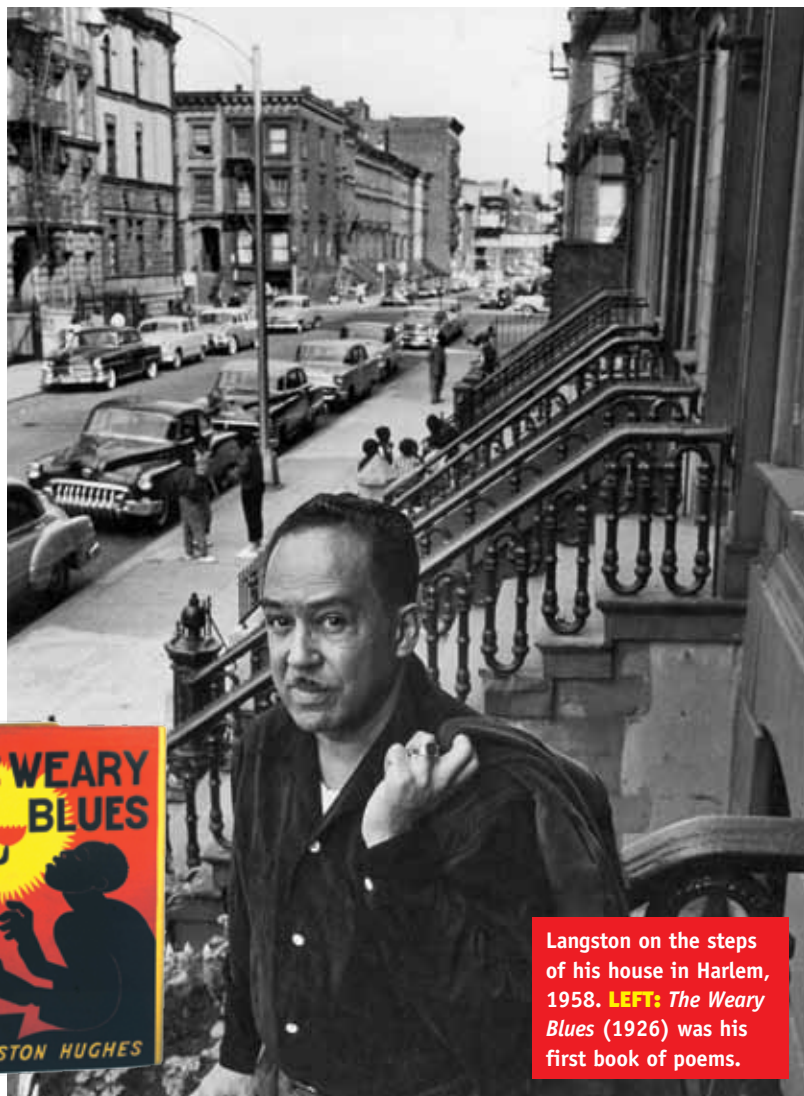
CHORUS: *I reach out my dreams to you.*

EPILOGUE

N3: Langston went on to become one of the most celebrated and **prolific** voices of the Harlem Renaissance. He wrote 13 volumes of poetry, as well as plays, novels, and essays.

N1: He wrote about race in America, about injustice and discrimination, and he celebrated African-American culture in his work.

N2: He was one of the first African-Americans to make a living as a writer.

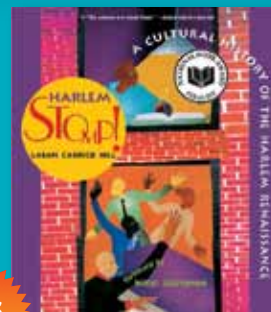


Langston on the steps of his house in Harlem, 1958. **LEFT:** *The Weary Blues* (1926) was his first book of poems.

OLD LANGSTON: I knew that if I wrote about the lives of ordinary African-Americans, they would know that they mattered, that what they thought mattered—just as my grandmother had taught me. ●

CONTEST

Write About Langston Lines from Langston Hughes's poems are woven into the play you just read. How does his poetry reflect his feelings and experiences? Why do you think so many people are inspired by his work? Write a paragraph answering **BOTH** these questions, using details from the play to support your ideas. Send it to **LANGSTON CONTEST**. Five winners will get Laban Carrick Hill's *Harlem Stomp!* See page 2 for details.



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