

## Handout - Langston Hughes Personal Narrative

*Langston Hughes remains one of the most well-known figures from the Harlem Renaissance. Born in Joplin, Missouri, Hughes moved to New York City after high school to study at Columbia University. Partly due to the racist culture of the University, Hughes dropped out and pursued writing. He became a tireless champion of Black arts and culture—not only the work of his colleagues, but also the vernacular and popular traditions of the African American community in general.*



*While the Harlem Renaissance was a flourishing of Black Arts and Culture, many Black creatives still found themselves needing wealthy (usually white) patrons to finance their larger creative projects. In the following excerpt from his autobiography, Hughes recalls a painful exchange between himself and a patron while he was trying to finance an Opera he was writing.*

*Note that “Negro” was a common term when Hughes was writing, but today is antiquated and no longer used.*

“Not Primitive”

That winter I had been in Cuba looking for a Negro composer to write an opera with me, using genuinely racial motifs [ . . . ] But I came back to New York with no Negro composer who could write an opera.

More and more tangled that winter became the skein of poet and patron, youth and age, poverty and wealth – and one day it broke! Quickly and quietly in the Park Avenue drawing room, it broke. Great wealth had given to a woman who meant to be kind the means to power, and a technique of power, of so mighty a strength that I do not believe she herself knew what that force might become. She possessed the power to control people’s lives – pick them up and put them down when and where she wished.

She wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the institutions of the primitive. But, unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro—who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa—but I was no Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem. And I was not what she wanted me to be. So, in the end it all came back very near to the old impasse of white and Negro again, white and Negro—as do most relationships in America.

Then too, I knew that my friend and benefactor was not happy because, for months now, I had written nothing beautiful. She was old and it took a great deal of strength out of her to worry about me, and she was, I think, a bit impatient with men who are not geniuses. (She knew so many great people.) So I asked kindly to be released from any further obligations to her, and that she give me



no more money, but simply let me retain her friendship and good will that had been so dear to me. That I asked to keep. But there must have been only the one thread binding us together. When that thread broke, it was the end.

I cannot write here about that last half-hour in the big bright drawing-room high above Park Avenue one morning, because when I think about it, even now, something happens in the pit of my stomach that makes me ill. That beautiful room, that had been so full of light and help and understanding for me, suddenly became like a trap closing in, faster and faster, the room darker and darker, until the light went out with a sudden crash in the dark, and everything became like that night in Kansas when I had failed to see Jesus and had lied about it afterwards. Or that morning in Mexico when I suddenly hated my father.

Physically, my stomach began to turn over and over – and then over again. I fought against bewilderment and anger, fought hard, and didn't say anything. I just sat there in the high Park Avenue drawing-room and didn't say anything. I sat there and listened to all she told me, closed my mouth hard and didn't say anything.

I do not remember clearly what she said to me at the end, nor her face as the door closed, nor the elevator dropping down to the street level, nor my final crossing of the lobby through a lane of uniformed attendants.

But I do remember the winter sunshine on Park Avenue and the wind in my face as I went toward the subway to Harlem.

*Source: The Big Sea: An Autobiography (Hill and Wang 1993)*