Born in Joplin, Missouri, James Langston Hughes was the great-great-grandson of Charles Henry Langston (brother of John Mercer Langston, the first Black American to be elected to public office). He attended Central High School in Cleveland, Ohio, where he began writing poetry in the eighth grade. His father would discourage him from pursuing writing as a career, in favour of something 'more practical'. Langston's tuition fees to Columbia University were paid on the grounds that he study engineering. After a while, he dropped out of the degree course, but continued to write poetry. His first published poem, The Negro Speaks of Rivers, was also one of his most famous, appearing in Brownie's Book. Later, his poems, short plays, essays and short stories would appear in the NAACP publication, Crisis Magazine, in Opportunity Magazine, and others.

One of Hughes' most acclaimed essays appeared in the Nation in 1926, entitled "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain". It spoke of Black writers and poets, "who would surrender racial pride in the name of a false integration," where a talented Black writer would prefer to be considered a poet, not a Black poet, which to Hughes meant he subconsciously wanted to write like a white poet. Hughes argued, "no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself."

"We younger Negro artists now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they aren't, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too... If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, as strong as we know how and we stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves."

Hughes' travels ranged to such diverse locations as Senegal, Nigeria, the Cameroons, the Belgian Congo, Angola, and Guinea in Africa; to Italy, France, Russia and Spain. Whether abroad, or at home in the US, Hughes loved to sit in the clubs listening to blues, jazz and writing poetry. A 'new rhythm' emerged in his writing, as evidenced by his collection of poems, "The Weary Blues". Returning to live in Harlem in 1924 -during a period often referred to as the 'Harlem Renaissance'- his work was frequently published and he wrote prolifically. Moving to Washington D.C., in 1925, his time spent in blues and jazz clubs increased even further.

"I tried to write poems like the songs they sang on Seventh Street... (these songs) had the pulse beat of the people who keep on going."

At this same time, Hughes accepted a job with Dr. Carter G. Woodson, editor of the Journal of Negro Life and History and founder of Black History Week in 1926. He returned to his beloved Harlem later that year.

Langston Hughes received a scholarship to Lincoln University, in Pennsylvania, where he received his B.A. degree in 1929. In 1943, he was awarded an honorary Lit.D by his alma mater; a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1935 and a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1940. Based on a conversation with a man he knew in a Harlem bar, he created a character know as My Simple Minded Friend in a series of essays in the form of a dialogue. In 1950, he named this lovable character Jess B. Simple, and authored a series of books on him.

Langston Hughes was a prolific writer. In the forty-odd years between his first book in 1926 and his death in 1967, he devoted his life to writing and lecturing. He wrote sixteen books of poems, two novels, three collections of short stories, four volumes of "editorial" and "documentary" fiction, twenty plays, children's poetry, musicals and operas, three autobiographies, a dozen radio and television scripts and dozens of magazine articles. In addition, he edited seven anthologies. The long and distinguished list of Hughes' works includes: Not Without Laughter (1930); The Big Sea (1940); I Wonder As I Wander" (1956), his autobiographies. His collections of poetry include: The Weary Blues (1926); The Negro Mother and other Dramatic Recitations (1931); The Dream Keeper (1932); Shakespeare In Harlem (1942); Fields of Wonder (1947); One Way Ticket (1947); The First Book of Jazz (1955); Tambourines To Glory (1958); and Selected Poems (1959); The Best of Simple (1961). He edited several anthologies in an attempt to popularize black authors and their works. Some of these are: An African Treasury (1960); Poems from Black Africa (1963); New Negro Poets: USA (1964) and The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers (1967).

Published posthumously were: Five Plays By Langston Hughes (1968); The Panther and The Lash: Poems of Our Times (1969) and Good Morning Revolution: Uncollected Writings of Social Protest (1973); The Sweet Flypaper of Life with Roy DeCarava (1984).

Langston Hughes died of cancer on May 22, 1967. His residence at 20 East 127th Street in Harlem, New York has been given landmark status by the New York City Preservation Commission. His block of East 127th Street was renamed "Langston Hughes Place".