Introduction

Chester Himes was one of the most prolific, problematic and neglected African-American writers of the twentieth century. He wrote 17 novels, dozens of collected and uncollected stories and essays, and a significant two-volume autobiography over a long and difficult life split between his native United States and self-exile in Europe. While receiving recognition and awards for his writing in France, Himes was largely unknown to American readers during most of his lifetime.

Part of this neglect can be attributed to the discriminatory attitude of American publishers and mainstream readers towards black writers during Himes’s lifetime. But Himes was also an author of irascible honesty and deep complexity. His unflinching view of racism and its physical and psychological toll on both blacks and whites alienated many who were unwilling to face the frightening aspects of violence and hatred that infused all of his work.

Himes was one of a very few crime and mystery story authors who actually committed crimes, having been an inmate at the Ohio State Penitentiary from 1929 to 1936. His harsh prison internment and its psychological effects, expressed so brutally in his prison stories and novel, might be considered a foreshadowing of the monumental institutionalized racism that has been inflicted on black males to this day. Himes was 19 when he went to prison for armed robbery and 26 when he was released. His outlaw persona, conforming to the “Badman” of black vernacular culture, was a proud stance and an instrumental tool in his survival both in prison and in the outside world. He later claimed that he learned to write in prison partly as a defensive ploy and a way to give voice to the invisible members of society.

After prison Himes continued to be thwarted in his goals by the destructive forces of racism, poverty, and unemployment, as well as artistic neglect. He moved with his wife, Jean Johnson, to California and wrote two books about his experiences working in the LA wartime industry of shipbuilding.
If He Hollers Let Him Go (1945) and Lonely Crusade (1947) were both poorly received and widely misunderstood by critics and readers. The negative reaction to these brutally honest novels brought retribution from his publishers, who arbitrarily cancelled publicity and support after publication of Lonely Crusade. Himes wrote his prison novel Cast the First Stone (1952) from a white male viewpoint to facilitate publication. Many passages were deleted and the result was an unfocused book that only regained its vitality when a reissued version entitled Yesterday Will Make You Cry (1998) restored its original black protagonist and deleted passages.

Chester Himes’s early work depicted one of the most unforgiving and disturbing visions of the African-American male experience in contemporary literature (see Bailey, chapter 21 in this volume). His first five novels are often grouped together unfairly under the rubric of protest novels. If He Hollers Let Him Go, Lonely Crusade, Cast the First Stone, The Third Generation (1954), and The Primitive (1955) provide a shocking social history of race relations in the United States from World War I through the Depression and World War II to the days of the black urban rebellion of the 1960s.

At age 44, after writing five novels, Himes found himself working as a busboy in a New York cafeteria. His long marriage with Jean Johnson was over and he had been falsely accused of reckless driving in an accident with a white woman, which led to more jail time. His life in the United States having come to an end, he left for Europe in 1953 with the encouragement of the African-American author Richard Wright, who was then living in Paris. Himes was also attracted by French critical acclaim for his writings. In 1952 reviewers selected Himes’s Lonely Crusade as one of the five best books by an American author published that decade in France.

In 1956 Himes was offered a contract to write a mystery novel by the French publishers Gallimard for their Serie Noire imprint, which published hard-boiled American writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Himes published his first mystery novel, For Love of Imabelle, in 1957, and the following year the French translation won the prestigious Grand prix de la littérature policière award for best mystery of 1958.

Between 1957 and 1969, Himes wrote his Harlem cycle of nine crime novels: For Love of Imabelle (1957); The Real Cool Killers (1959); The Crazy Kill (1959); The Big Gold Dream (1960); All Shot Up (1960); Cotton Comes to Harlem (1965); The Heat’s On (1966); and Blind Man with a Pistol (1969). These books, set in Harlem, featured two black New York City police detectives, Coffin Ed Johnson and Gravedigger Jones. With a cast of all black characters they revolutionized African-American detective fiction, a tradition that stretched back to Pauline Hopkins’s Hagar’s Daughter (1901–2) and John E. Bruce’s The Black Sleuth (1907–9). (See Bailey, chapter 21 in this volume.)

The mystery novels proved to be a perfect vehicle for Himes’s sardonic and absurdist vision of American culture. They also “signified” (to use the black vernacular for “parodied”) and expanded on the hard-boiled tradition of the lone private eye. Himes was able to work important “Blues Detective” tropes (Soitos 1996: 27–51) into his
socially aware and highly critical texts, including black detective personas working
as teams rather than as individuals, “Double Conscious Detection” that used “black-
ness” as a disguise or mask in the detective process, and the use of black vernaculars
(musical as well as linguistic) and “hoodoo” practices and beliefs drawn from black
spiritual and religious traditions.

Besides the mystery novels featuring Gravedigger and Coffin Ed, Himes also
wrote the superb suspense novel *Run, Man, Run* (1969), which also takes place in
Harlem, and two satiric novels dealing with white and black sexual relations,
*Pinktoes* (1961) and *Case of Rape* (1963). A film version of *Cotton Comes to Harlem*
in 1970 further increased Himes’s standing internationally. In 1972 he published
the first volume of his autobiography *The Quality of Hurt* and in 1976 the second
volume, *My Life of Absurdity*. In 1993, his unfinished apocalyptic novel of violent
black revolution, *Plan B*, appeared posthumously. Chester Himes died on November
12, 1984 in Spain.

The Man

Himes’s reputation as a mystery and crime writer is often attributed to the substantial
achievement of his Harlem series of crime novels. It is not generally realized how
integral to his work are the notion of crime and the exclusion of the criminal from
society. Himes’s fascination with crime writing has its roots in his early reading of
mystery and crime stories, but the genre was also a perfect means for expressing
Himes’s worldview, particularly his assessment of the African-American male’s condi-
tion in a racist society. In Himes’s fiction an individual’s outrage at blatant prejudice
and subtler violations of his personal integrity often lead to violence and social rebel-
lion against dominant white authority figures and racist power structures.

Crime fiction was not just a literary puzzle or game to Himes. For him, crime gave
voice to the voiceless as well as providing them with a means of revenge. Given the
crucial similarities between his own life and those of his fictionalized selves, both the
earlier novels he wrote in the United States and much of his later fiction appear to be
highly autobiographical.

One might say that the writer in Chester Himes was conceived in fire and born in
prison. On Easter Monday, April 21, 1930 a prison wing at Ohio Penitentiary caught
on fire. The blaze was quick and merciless, racing up five tiers of the huge cellblock
in punishing waves of heat and smoke. Prison guards caught unawares were unable
to enter the blazing inferno to unlock the cells. Prisoners in the other wings of the
huge building watched helplessly as the fire grew. In desperation they broke from
their surrounding cellblocks and attempted to free the trapped men beating on the
bars of their cells. Himes, prisoner and would-be writer, was among this milling
crowd of helpless would-be rescuers tormented by the screams of the dying men. Only
a few badly burned prisoners were removed before the cellblock was consumed and
317 prisoners lost their lives dying like animals in locked cages.
This event forced Himes to confront the horror of prison life and became the basis of one of his earliest short stories, “To What Red Hell” (1934). The story was a graphic and harrowing indictment of the consequences of centralized institutional power and provides a frightening description of prisoners abandoned and helpless. The story was instrumental for Himes in defining and giving expression to his rage over what it meant to be a black male in America. In writing it he became conscious of his inferior status — “furious boiling with all that hot rebellion I’d been feeling of late against the least thing that appeared to jeopardize my rights” (Himes 1973: 177). Himes emerged from the infernal world of the prison fire with a new authorial voice. Possessed with a growing political consciousness, he sought an evolving and coherent definition of himself as a free person. He would dedicate his life to depicting this dilemma in incendiary prose that shocked his readership.

Another crucial story from this period featured a black protagonist. “The Night’s for Crying” (1937), Himes’s story of a black man on death row, emphasizes the man’s intense isolation and his unquenched resistance against discriminatory society to the end. This later version of “Blackie” is an alienated man nursing his hatred of white authority, but he also represents the innumerable suffering black men excluded and discriminated against in all aspects of American life. He is the very essence of a black man trapped in the core of his country who insists on dying the way he lived: in utter and total defiance of a prejudiced society and judicial system.

_Cast the First Stone_ (1952), Himes’s third novel after _If He Hollers Let Him Go_ and _Lonely Crusade_, deals with prison life and the behavior patterns necessary for survival in prison. Featuring white characters, it was rewritten to artistic death from an original manuscript Himes’s had started in prison. Jim Monroe, a white inmate serving 20–25 years for armed robbery, is involved in a prison riot, a fire, gambling, numerous intrigues, and a significant love affair with another prisoner, Dido. But this prison memoir, inhibited by its white point of view, is dry and ineffectual. The nexus of confinement is ambiguous and the reader is more tantalized by what was left out than by what was included.

This novel was later reissued with the black viewpoint restored and revelatory passages concerning white and black relations, including male love, deeply analyzed. _Yesterday Will Make You Cry_, Himes’s original manuscript version of his prison years, is an overwhelmingly revealing indictment of institutionalized racism and the growing state-sponsored prejudice that would later erupt in the 1950s and 60s into a civil war over civil rights in the inner cities of the United States.

Himes’s writing was influenced not only by his experiences in prison, but also by his knowledge of and fondness for pulp crime fiction published in such early detective magazines as _Black Mask_. He directed the conventions of the hard-boiled genre to his own ends, reworking the tough, detached, cynical viewpoint of the hard-boiled crime narrative into a commentary on the oppressed black male in white America. Crime and violence, motivated by generic temptations in their original pulp contexts, became connected in Himes’s imagination with revolt, defiance, and the validation of blackness.
Besides the use of pulp fiction motifs in his writing, Himes also utilized a primarily black vernacular cultural form. This was the idea of the bad black, the “Badman,” an incorrigible rebel of folklore who generated numerous folk ballads and songs in the black oral tradition. Himes was familiar with this vernacular role, which was often performed in prison environments by black inmates.

This Badman heroic tradition emphasized the inherent powers of the black hero triumphant over white oppression. This was a stance similar to the Trickster tradition in which the intellectual and conjuring skills of the black outwitted the Man. One such Badman figure was Bras Coupe, who lived in Louisiana in the 1830s. Coupe was a native African sold as a slave who escaped to the Louisiana swamps, where he formed a Marron (from the French, “marronage,” for “fugitive”) colony. He raided plantations, murdered whites and defied capture with the use of hoodoo or conjuration. Another legendary Badman was Morris Slater, commonly known as Railroad Bill, who appeared in 1893. He robbed trains and supplied poor blacks along the tracks with the goods he appropriated. His ability to elude capture created the myth that he was a powerful shape-shifter who could change his form at will.

These folk legends were captured in the vibrant and energizing song heritage of the African-American folk tradition. Songs about such real-life Badmen have parallels in the toasts or *signifying* (“cutting”) contests attributed to Stagolee, a mythical figure, who like earlier heroic ballad figures was a fast-talking, action-oriented, and violent defender of his natural rights. These heroic Badman forms have also had a strong impact on the Blues, that other bastion of black secular expression, and more recently on Rap music, where modern avengers brag and list poetically their powers and accomplishments.

**Early Life**

Himes’s writing was crucially shaped by a disturbing family dynamic, which had a profound psychological effect as well. He was born on July 20 in Jefferson City, Missouri. His father Joseph Sandy Himes headed the mechanical arts department at a local black college. Chester was the youngest in his family with two older brothers, Joseph and Edward. His mother, Estelle Bomar, was light-skinned and claimed that her family was descended from English nobility through the paternity of her family’s southern plantation owner.

Estelle’s social-register fantasy and aristocratic attitudes betrayed a very serious and debilitating form of color prejudice within the black community that was to affect Chester Himes’s image of himself throughout his troubled life. Her attitudes were a source of conflict between her husband and her three sons. Perhaps of all of them, Chester was affected the most, torn between his mother’s assimilation creed and his natural need to rebel and determine his own identity as a black man in racist America.
His fourth novel, *The Third Generation* (1954), deals specifically with this dilemma and others associated with a black family growing to maturity in the segregated South at the beginning of the twentieth century. Himes maintained that he was the product of two opposing traditions, the body-servant tradition, represented by his light-skinned mother, and the field-hand tradition represented by his father, a very dark man whose ancestors worked in the fields. Himes respected his father, but he maintained that Joseph Sandy Himes “was born and raised in the tradition of the southern Uncle Tom … [an] inherited slave mentality, which accepts the premise that white people know best” (Himes 1970b: 26). The attitudinal conflict embodied by his parents seems to be reflected in the constant friction between a white female (or near-white female) and a black male that appears in four of Himes’s first five novels. Himes later recalled how deeply hurt his mother was by knowing he could not have straight hair. As a young man he remembered “the tenderness of doing her nails, the soft delight of her hair, the passion of her whippings” (Himes 1954: 235).

This schism over racial identity in Himes’s family had parallel repercussions in the environment of his youth. Early racial incidents contributed to his sense of guilt and unworthiness, sometimes compounded with personal or family tragedies. On one early occasion, Chester and his older brother Joseph planned to demonstrate the use of explosives to an assembly at their father’s college, but Chester’s mother forbade him to participate. Performing the experiment alone, Joseph made a mistake and was blinded. Unable to be admitted to a white hospital, he never received the medical care required to save his sight. Chester, suffering from survivor’s guilt, blamed himself for his older brother’s blindness.

Another incident occurred in early 1926 when Chester was working as a busboy at the Wade Park hotel in Cleveland. He fell down an open elevator shaft and suffered a back injury that plagued him for the rest of his life. White doctors would not care for him and the hotel discriminated against him by firing him and refusing to pay compensation.

In September 1926 Himes enrolled in Ohio State University, where he did poorly in part because of the racist environment. “I was tired of [the university’s] policy of discrimination and segregation, fed up with the condescension, which I could never bear. … [I]t was much later in life that I came to understand I simply hadn’t accepted my status as a ‘nigger’” (Himes 1972: 28). What Himes would not accept was being relegated to the status of a lower-class citizen because of color. In reaction, he created a new persona that was the reverse of the role being imposed on him. He now acted out the part of the Badman and he did it with a flair and vengeance that surprised even him.

After dropping out of school Himes returned to Cleveland and took up the street life. He associated with members of the black underworld, where he gambled and pimped and learned something of the hustling world. “Little Katzi,” as Himes was affectionately called by his friends, was arrested for burglary and forgery; he took drugs and became notorious for his violence. “I discovered that I had become very violent,” he later wrote. “I saw a glimmer of fear and caution in the eyes of most
people I encountered. Squares, hustlers, gamblers, pimps, even whores. I had heard that people were saying ‘Little Katzi will kill you.’ I can’t say what I might have done” (Himes 1972: 47).

Himes met Jean Johnson, his future wife, during this period, but although she provided some stability to his life, Himes was launched on a trajectory of self-destruction and could not be stopped. In November 1928 he broke into the home of a rich, white Cleveland couple and robbed them at gunpoint of $20,000 in cash and $28,000 in jewelry. He fled to Chicago, where he was arrested.

At the detective bureau his feet were bound, his wrists handcuffed behind his back, and he was hung upside down on an open door and pistol-whipped on the face and testicles until he confessed. In December 1928 he was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to serve 20–25 years at hard labor. The sentence was severe, even for the times, but an earlier, even more serious crime Himes had committed might have influenced his sentence. A few months before his arrest, he and an accomplice had broken into a State Armory and stolen cases of guns that Himes had sold to Cleveland mill workers and criminals in his neighborhood.

Himes later claimed that he grew to manhood in the Penitentiary, where he learned how to survive for 8 years in a very dangerous environment. “On occasion, it must have seemed to others that I was bent on self-destruction,” he wrote (Himes 1972: 61). Himes was also intent on developing a writing career, which created an aura of power around him in the eyes of the other inmates and even the guards. They learned to treat him with cautious respect for his writing skills, a source of mysterious allure in a prison population where inmates fought to the death with knives over whether France was in Paris or Paris in France.

In May 1936 Chester Himes was paroled, and he and Jean Johnson married the next year. Although he thought of himself as a writer, he could not make a living with his pen. Instead, he supported himself and his wife by working as a part-time waiter and contributing to an Ohio writer’s project for the WPA program.

In 1941 Chester and Jean moved to California. He worked at 23 jobs in the next 4 years in the shipyards of Los Angeles and he wrote his first two novels at the same time. Himes was later to say that “Los Angeles hurt me racially as much as any city I have ever known – much more than any city from the South” (Himes 1972: 73). The anger, frustration and sense of rejection Himes experienced in Los Angeles were readily transferred to If He Hollers Let Him Go (1945) and Lonely Crusade (1947). Both books are told from the viewpoint of a black male who is involved with the shipyards as a welder in the first book and as union organizer for a black union in the second.

In the first book Bob Jones comes to California from Cleveland to work because at home he was being refused work while white men were being hired ahead of him. In California, however, he finds a more insidious species of discrimination that gives him repetitive nightmares in which he is falsely accused of crimes and hunted down by angry mobs of white people. Bob Jones finds himself in a racial trap. He is hounded by his white superiors in the shipyard and forced to work like a machine in the worst conditions. His interior sense of persecution assumes an outward form when a white
southern woman on his worksite accuses of him rape. In the end Jones is run off his job by white workers and forced to join the US army.

In *Lonely Crusade* Lee Gordon is involved in a complicated political game between Communists, black workers and the owner of the Shipyards. The black union is being sold out and Lee Gordon is presented with the moral dilemma of standing up for what he knows is right or accepting a permanent management position. In the middle of this conundrum Gordon strives to keep his manhood intact. Class warfare and economic subjugation of black workers are constant themes here: Gordon must reject the Communist party line and confront the manipulative capitalist manager. In the end, Lee Gordon heroically leads the union parade straight into a police cordon that has orders to shoot him on sight.

In these early novels the protagonists are always planning retaliatory violence against whites who have insulted and humiliated them, but they rarely put these plans into action. Instead, ferocities of hate multiply and disdain for the hypocritical American system drives Himes’s protagonists into a terrible personal anguish that destroys their lives and the lives of those around them.

Himes’s publisher Knopf had lined up radio appearances and book signings at the book department at Macy’s and Bloomingdales in New York City on the day *Lonely Crusade* was published. Getting cold feet at the last minute, Knopf canceled the signings and Himes was also dropped from an interview planned for a CBS network show. Himes believed he was being punished for his unsympathetic portrayal of Communists in the black community and in the labor movement, as well as for his discomfiting critique of racism at all levels of society. After these publishing failures and lack of public response to his novels, Himes was discouraged enough to stop writing for a few years. He wondered whether literature could meaningfully articulate the difficult truths of a black male’s absurd existence in the American system.

He and Jean settled on the East Coast where Himes worked in a series of menial jobs in and around New York City – caretaker, porter, janitor, dishwasher, bellhop. In 1948 he delivered a speech at the University of Chicago entitled “The Dilemma of the Negro Novelist.”

His brutally honest assessment of the situation for black writers in the United States was not well received. White Americans, he maintained, only wanted to be entertained by the black experience. Mainstream America did not take black literary artists seriously. It was no wonder, therefore, that black people should feel angry. “To hate white people,” he said, “is one of the first emotions an American Negro experiences. … He must of necessity hate white people. He would not be, and it would not be human if he did not, develop a hatred for his oppressors” (Himes 1966b: 56). Furthermore, the black writer had to deal with the reaction of the black middle class, a mixture of caution laced with antagonism. Himes portrayed African-Americans as soul-sick after centuries of oppression: writing as he did was “opening old wounds … an agony … to be reviled by … negroes and whites alike” (Himes 1966b: 53).

Himes essential message was that a black writer cannot free himself of race consciousness because he cannot free himself from race. This constant pull and tug on
the black consciousness, what W. E. B. Du Bois characterized as the Double Consciousness dilemma, drove Himes into serious depression and alcoholism. His life was a series of mishaps, broken relationships and no-end jobs. Himes had come to the conclusion that to be an observant recorder of the racial atmosphere in mid-century America could only lead to anti-social behavior and eventual self-destruction. His assessment was startling. “If this plumbing for the truth reveals within the negro personality homicidal mania, lust for white women, a pathetic sense of inferiority, paradoxical anti-Semitism, arrogance, Uncle Tomism, hate and fear and self-hate,” he said, “this then is the effect of oppression on the human personality” (Himes 1966b: 57).

In 1951 Chester and Jean separated, and towards the end of his New York period he was involved in an affair with a white woman that became the principal inspiration for the novel *The Primitive*. The novel covers a period of seven days in which Jesse Robinson, an unsuccessful black writer, becomes the lover of the unstable Kris Cummings. Jesse and Kris are symbols of the destructive force of prejudice and racism. Kris sees in Jesse an exotic savage who is always capable of satisfying her physical appetites, while Jesse sees in Kris the ideal of feminine beauty and will sell his soul to make love to her. Both are caught and deluded by the stereotypical myths of black men and white women. Eventually, Jesse kills Kris in a drunken rage on a Sunday night, but he does not realize she is dead until Monday, when he is caught and arrested. Both lovers, it seems, are destroyed by racism. Himes has stated in relation to the novel: "the final answer of any black to a white woman with whom he lives in a white society is violence" (Himes 1972: 137).

One element of the book is common to almost all of Himes’s work: his use of autobiographical incident as a means of exploring and relieving his personal anguish. Himes later said that everything in the book was true except that he did not kill the white woman. Writing this inter-racial love story acted as a catharsis for him and allowed him to continue his writing.

Himes was convinced that the African-American was a new species of human being because of the hybrid quality of his identity. The “negro problem” as he saw it was a manifestation of cultural and racial prejudices and misconceptions so complicated that it was inexplicable and always resulted in farcical tragedy – a tragedy shared by millions. In his writing he struggled with how difficult it was to earn respect in the United States as a free-born African American.

Himes returned to the theme of sexual power and control in inter-racial relationships in two other novels, *Pinktoes* (1961) and *A Case of Rape* (1963). In these novels social taboos prevent any positive relationship from developing. Both of these books attacked racial stereotyping and lambasted black generational infighting and color discrimination within the race.

*Pinktoes* parodies race relations with vicious glee. Mamie Mason is a Chicago black political activist and socialite determined to resolve the race issue single-handedly. As an egotistical social meddler she engineers elaborate mixed-race get-togethers, but the guests come not to solve the race problem but to enjoy inter-racial sex. This
respectable group of people have deluded themselves into believing that they are improving black-white relationships when, in reality, all they are doing is playing out sexual stereotypes.

Himes declared that _A Case of Rape_ was written in order to reveal the preconceptions and humiliations to which black Americans were subjected in Paris during the Algerian war. The main characters are exiles mordantly self-conscious about race and sex. The book serves as an expose of the judicial and social prejudices of a French society deeply split by its own buried and often denied racism.

Europe

Himes was an expatriate African-American in the last half of his life. He went to Paris at the same time as Richard Wright and James Baldwin, where he joined a long list of African-American writers and musicians seeking redemption, if not sanity, by living in Europe. However, he never became a member of any expatriate community, moving over the years from France to Sweden to Spain and traveling throughout much of Western Europe. Himes's major achievement in the second half of his life spent in Europe was the series of detective novels he wrote during his last two decades.

Detective fiction has proven to be a dynamic literary device for the implementation and testing of cultural worldviews. Its continuous popularity supports this contention, as does the frequency of experimentation with the form. The conventions of the genre were effectively challenged by African-American authors who transformed them for their own use, infusing the text with black tropes that led to the creation of an African-American detective tradition. Rather than focusing simply on the crime and capture of the suspect, “blues detectives,” as I choose to call them, are interested in the social and political atmosphere, often to the exclusion of detection. This social and political atmosphere is suffused by racial prejudice. Recognizing his or her own blackness, as well as what blackness means to the characters in the text, the Blues Detective is a new creation in the detective literary landscape, representing a complex amalgam of African American cultural signs.

In 1956 Himes met Marcel Duhamel, the editor of _La Serie Noire_, a mystery/crime imprint published by Gallimard. The French publisher suggested Himes write a detective novel and Himes agreed to write one because he was broke. In the early 1930s Himes had published his crimes stories in _Esquire_ and _Abbott's Monthly_, and he had subscribed to _Black Mask_, the foremost detective pulp of the era. Thus, when Duhamel suggested to Himes that he read Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, two classic American hard-boiled writers, Himes was already ahead of him.

In the nine novels of the Harlem series, Himes staked out radical territory in the annals of American crime fiction and became an important contributor to the African-American Blues Detective tradition. The novels form a bridge from Rudolph Fischer's _The Conjure Man Dies_ (1932), once considered the first African-American authored
black mystery novel, to the unbridled success of black crime writing, both male and female, that erupted in the late twentieth century with such names as Walter Mosley (see Gruesser, chapter 44 in this volume) and Barbara Neely. In detective fiction Himes found a vehicle that helped him elucidate the peculiar conditions of racism in America. His economic and political critique of American society is honed to a razor's edge in the novels he wrote featuring his two black detective characters, Coffin Ed and Gravedigger, double-conscious detectives who must use trickery and violence to survive. Drawing on the folk tradition of the black Badman, they use their guns on white and black citizens alike and their blackness to get into places that white officers fear to approach, like the inner sanctum of Sister Heavenly's dope den in *The Heat's On* (1966).

Himes's descriptions of Harlem, a city within a city, are laced with indictments of the white power structure. Desperation in Harlem is the engine of numerous scams and rip-offs, part of the paradox that is Harlem and that contributes to the complex behavior of its inhabitants. The catalog of religious charlatans and swindlers is long, including Sweet Prophet Brown in *The Big Gold Dream* (1960), who works his flock for money, to the Reverend Sam in *Blind Man with a Pistol*, who uses a harem of black nuns for material gain and sexual release, to Tomsson Black, who creates chaos on a grand scale in *Plan B*. Inherently critical of white power structures, Himes indicates that racism and one of its offspring, poverty, are directly responsible for the craziness of his Harlem world. His worldview suggests that there is little hope for improvement.

It is important, however, that we do not associate critique with negativity. Himes was proud of black people and black culture and proved himself a pioneering detective writer through his use of black detective tropes as well as his willingness to satirize black behavior. The important point is that Himes was aware of the shared values that help define African-American culture that he hoped, through satire, to promote and strengthen.

Interestingly, Himes's satiric vision came to rest on a rather drastic solution to America's racism. His new solution evolved out of his fascination with a characteristic of detective novels in general – their use of violence. Speaking about the detective form, Himes says, “It's just plain and simple violence in narrative form” (Williams 1973: 314). Himes's use of violence in the novels evolves from comic vision to serious confrontation. Often the two are mixed in a way that makes them hard to distinguish. In *Real Cool Killers*, a man whose arm is cut off with an axe yells at his assailant, “Wait a minute, you big mother raper, till Ah finds my arm! ... It got my knife in his hand” (Himes 1966a: 8). Early in the detective series Coffin Ed and Grave Digger function as ordering devices in the novels, but as the series progresses, attitudes change. The detectives lose control and other forces outside and inside Harlem take over. Ultimately, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed are unable to solve crimes in a world spinning out of control. At the end of *Blind Man with a Pistol*, Himes's last complete novel, the two detectives take potshots at rats fleeing a burning tenement while a race riot engulfs the Harlem community.
Many incidents in the novels suggest that the violence in Himes’s work moves from a random pattern of absurdist incidents towards a more pointed political message. In *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, a black attendant to the Reverend Deke O’Malley is gunned down by a white gang wearing black masks, and “human brains flew through the air like macabre birds” (Himes 1970a: 11). Himes’s theory of detective narration based on violence also becomes more sophisticated in the later works. In the last novels and in *Plan B*, Himes’s ultimate statement on racial conditions in America, the violence reaches new heights.

Interestingly, however, the violence in these stories differs from that of his earlier work in that it now reflects a coherent viewpoint. Forced into extremes of behavior by racist practices, American blacks now answer back in bursts of violent activity. In *Plan B* this culminates in armed black revolution.

In 1972 Himes said, “It is an absolute fact that if the blacks in America were to mount a revolution in force with organized violence to the saturation point, that the entire black problem would be solved” (Fuller 1972: 18). *Plan B* describes this black revolution in graphic detail. Many whites are killed and the result is repression on a grand scale by the American authorities, including the internment of black Americans in concentration camps, an outcome considered quite real at the time among many members of the black community. Himes’s latent anger expressed itself in ever more vivid forms over the course of his career, from echoes of slave revolts through the Badman mystique to organized violent revolution.

In his final years, after the completion of his two-volume autobiography, Himes’s energies were reduced by illness. Retiring to his house in southern Spain he lived out his last days in relative comfort with his second wife, Lesley Packard. He died and was buried in Spain in 1984.