

# SHINING LAMP

A Bahá'í who served humanity with radiance

## ROBERT HAYDEN: POET OF HIGHEST HONOR

If you've read Robert Hayden's poetry, you've seen a glimpse of the challenges he's faced. He grew up in Detroit, Michigan, among poverty, racism, and violence. Soon after he was born in 1913, his parents separated, and he was raised by foster parents. Life in the foster home was troubled. Robert was sometimes beaten. In one poem, he wrote of "fearing the chronic angers of that house."

He also had difficulty with other kids, who often made fun of him. Because of his very poor eyesight, he wore thick glasses and couldn't participate in sports.

Robert dealt with his problems by diving into reading and writing. At 16, he discovered African American poems about the struggles and triumphs of black history. Then he began writing his own poetry. His first published poem was "Africa," which appeared in a magazine when he was 18.

### FINDING FAITH

Robert earned a scholarship to go to college in Detroit, where he was an honor student. When Robert was 26, he married Erma Morris. The same year, he won an award for his first book of poetry, *Heart-shape in the Dust*.

Robert and Erma met a group of Bahá'ís on campus, and they began to study the Bahá'í Faith. Erma became a Bahá'í in 1941, and

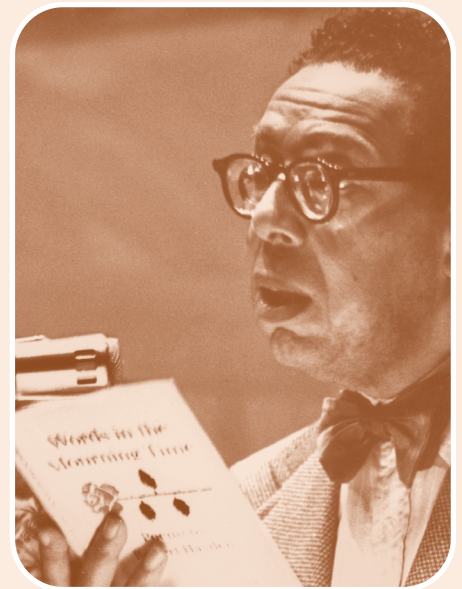


PHOTO BY DAVID SMITH

**Left:** Robert Hayden wrote, "I believe in the essential oneness of all people and . . . the basic unity of all religions." **Right:** As a poet, Robert read at public events, as he did here in 1972. He later became a Consultant in Poetry to the U.S. Library of Congress, an honored role now called a Poet Laureate.

Robert joined the Faith in 1943.

Robert often wrote about Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith. In one poem he referred to Bahá'u'lláh as the "architect of our hope of peace." Robert also said he felt "sustained in my attempts to be a poet" due to the Bahá'í belief that writing "is of spiritual value and it is a way of performing some kind of service."

### HIGHEST RECOGNITION

After earning his master's degree, Robert worked as a university English professor for 34 years. He also gave poetry readings around the country, and he shared the Bahá'í Faith with many audiences.

Robert published 10 volumes of

poetry and won many awards. His highest honor came in 1976, when he became the first African American to be named Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. The position, now known as Poet Laureate of the United States, is the highest recognition for an American poet.

When he passed away in 1980, the Universal House of Justice\* praised Robert's "numerous honors and distinguished contribution [to] poetry [in] America." Robert's dedication to art, faith, and humanity live on in his poetry. He wrote, "May you walk with beauty before you, beauty behind you, all around you, and The Most Great Beauty keep you His concern."\*\*\*