

“Cora Unashamed”: Relationships and Their Racial Implications

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Abstract

Injustice, oppression, and bad treatment are among those habits that have been lingering in societies that many writers have been trying hard to address throughout the ages. Among those writers is Langston Hughes in his story “Cora Unashamed” where he has boldly presented the real struggle of black people with a white system.

“Cora Unashamed” appeared in his work *The Ways of White Folks* (ed. 1971). The important relationship in this story is that of the white and black races; in the story, Cora represents the blacks while the Studevants and their daughter are white. Worth mentioning is the male-female relationship in this story. By exploring the concept of racial master-slave relationship and studying the idea of the whites’ superiority, the paper aims at scrutinizing how the whites use racism and slavery to approve their domination over the blacks. Besides, it investigates the impacts of slavery and racism on the blacks. Close-reading method is employed to analyze the story. Besides, the contextual method which focuses on intrinsic and extrinsic elements is utilized. The result of the analysis shows that race helps in the whites’ domination over other minorities, particularly the blacks. In other respect, master-slave relationships have their great negative economic impacts on the poor people.

Keywords: Cora, black, white, unashamed, Hughes, race

1. Introduction

In his works, Langston Hughes (1902-67) presents the tension between the blacks and the whites for it has reached its climax in his time. As a writer, Hughes is known for his poems. He wrote prose as well; one of his prose works is *The Ways of White Folks* (1st published in 1934). This literary work consists of fourteen short stories focusing on racism, slavery, and other related issues in the United States. This collection of stories demonstrates the ways that white Americans use to oppress the blacks and violate their rights. As usual, Hughes attempts in this story to “explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America” (Wei, 2007, p. 129). The blacks are “treated badly; they eat in the kitchen, they are not beautiful, [their] children's happiness is tarnished, and racial discrimination is inhumane” (Mutmainnah et. al., 2022, p. 350).

“Cora Unashamed” is one of these stories that have appeared in Hughes’s *The Ways of White Folks*. It is about a maid called Cora Jenkins, who works for a White family called the Studevants. Cora helps raise their daughter, Jessie. Indeed, “race proves to be highly significant in constructing whiteness and blackness. It decides on social actors’ positions within the social reality” (Al-Ramahi et. al., 2021, p. 670). At the funeral of Jessie, Cora articulates her opinion regarding what is taking place, and leaves the scene. In this vein, Hooks (1992) argues that “the only way black women can construct radical subjectivity is by resisting set norms and challenging the politics of domination based on race, class, and sex” (p. 58). Also, Green (2009) argues that “issues regarding black identity can affect people for generations” (p. 35). Hence, every African American should play his/her role to provide positive images of this race, emphasize their rights as human beings, and let people of all nations know about their problematic history. Hughes has done his part as a writer in challenging and immortalizing hardships that his black minority is facing. Indeed, he has documented a lot of racial acts, therefore his literature recounts the tale of US history from the silenced viewpoint of Black Americans (Miller, 2020). The issue of race has been addressed by many writers, yet a lot of work is needed as long as the problem is persisting. Those studies that I have a chance to look at are about the collection of stories in *The Ways of White Folks* in general and try to focus on the efforts of the writer; it is rare to have a complete paragraph about the story in question. In this article, “Cora Unashamed” will be separately analyzed in order to explore the consequences of what Cora has lived and experienced. Such a story presents the skill Hughes has in using language in order to address a crucial case in a short story. Moreover, the study of such a short literary work will open the way for researchers to investigate and fathom short works that have presented issues and discussed topics of great concerns.

One may say that racism and minority issues have been discussed a lot, and there is no need to tackle it again and again. The answer is simple; as long as social injustice persists and is existing, they should be addressed. In addition, I have not seen an article that specifies, analyzes, and focuses on a very short story in order to attract attention to the message such a story involves. Researchers are usually concerned for novels and/or authors; they refer to short stories in few sentences. This article addresses and analyzes “Cora Unashamed” in detail. Moreover, it is a good idea to go back to authors of a specific era and remind readers of their efforts in a particular regard.

In analyzing Hughes's "Cora Unashamed," close-reading method is adopted. The data are gained from the story. Furthermore, the contextual method is employed to conduct literary analysis. The contextual method focuses on intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic elements emphasize the characters and major conflicts in the story, while the extrinsic elements adopt the concept of racism and slavery that Hughes experiences. From Hughes's viewpoint, "Each human being must live within his time, with and for his people, and within the boundaries of his country" (Tracy, 2004, p. 66). He gains his popularity in his community as a "representative voice" in "the American scene at large" (Tulaboevna & Xasanboy, 2022, p. 145). The text of "Cora Unashamed" is analyzed in a way to track the implications of the main character's relationships. By using the contextual method, this article will explore the main character's relationships and lead to exposing many implications that have influenced and affected Cora's relationship within her milieu. By the way, "Cora Unashamed" is divided into three parts referred to as I, II, and III. While quoting from the story I will refer to the part and the paragraph number; e.g. (II. 4).

2. Discussion

With extraordinary economy, directness, and clarity, Hughes depicts the survival of the spirit in a life of grinding poverty and servitude and in a time when racism was a standard and acceptable social attitude. (Lazere, 1998)

The mid-twentieth century witnessed racial tension in America. At that time, racial segregation was noticeable in many parts of America particularly the South. Black people and white people were unable to attend the same schools, sit next to each other on buses and trains, or even use the same toilets. Black people and white people have separate churches and cemeteries. Despite the abolition of slavery and the enactment of many laws, racist practices persist in our modern world, and what is happening on the ground, seen by the inhabitants of the globe through various means of communication, is nothing but the tip of the iceberg.

A literary survey of the African-American literature indicates that it mostly spots light on the sorrow, agony, and painful experiences of the African-Americans throughout history. As a result, the outstanding literary works of African-American writers strive to explore the problems of this minority in an oppressive American community, in addition to the pride of African-Americans in their cultural heritage as expressed in their literary works.

Langston Hughes's heroine, Cora Jenkins, is a poor black maid. She lives in Melton and works for the white Studevants. She learns through her work and experience to struggle and face injustice and persecution whatever the price is: "Cora was like a tree-once rooted, she stood, in spite of storms and strike, wind, and rocks, in the earth" (I. 3). Yet, her struggle and reaction require time, understanding of her real world, and courage. During her stay at the service of the Studevants family, she attains all of these requirements.

Cora is the Studevants' maid of all work. They treat her like an animal but "she stood it" (I. 3). They think that they possess her and "they were perfectly right" (I. 7). Expressively, Hughes presents the human case of his heroine. As a matter of fact, Hughes uses "words as a medium to protest the injustices and racialized violence that occurred throughout United States history" (Lewis, 2023, p. 2). Cora accepts all this humiliation and continues to work because simply she wants to live; her need requires a sacrifice. So, she has to pay for her living, and in such cases, all values might be ignored; "it is a world of struggle" (Dohal, 2018, p. 673) for the sake of survival. It is through her work with this white family that she can earn money. Her contact and relationship with this family teach Cora the meaning of humiliation, cruelty and indeed the lack of feeling among the whites she works for. They try to rob her of her identity as a human being and destroy her morale. They do not want her to gain anything despite her misery. This is the way every dominating master works on. According to Osburn-Cole (2020), "Langston Hughes [has] revealed spaces of common people experiencing white racial oppression all around them. His works [have] intertwined pressing [and] violent experiences of black people" (p. 4). As a witness of a hard era, he immortalizes minute details that are difficult for others to describe.

On the other hand, Cora's relationship with her black family gives the best example of bearing responsibility and taking care of her family. She is the oldest of a family of eight children- "the Jenkins niggers" (I. 9). In the eighth grade she quits school and goes to work for the Studevants, bringing her pay to feed her father's children. This act shows her loyalty and gratitude to her family. This life-everlasting relation helps her to revolt against persecution and injustice at the end because she knows she has a family to go back to. Though she supports her family financially, she needs their social and existing incorporeal support in order to continue her struggle and to find a way of overcoming any problematic situation she faces in her life. So, we see that "ultimate freedom is what Hughes desires for his community" (Trudeau, 2009, p. 59). In his article "'My Adventures as a Social Poet'", Hughes (1947) articulates such a point, "And certainly, racially speaking, my own problems of adjustment to American life were the same as those of millions of other segregated Negroes" (p. 205). Segregation and ignoring the blacks are among the methods that are used to discourage this minority's morale. Such behavior is what the whites work on in order to entrench the backs' inferiority. The idea that white people are superior to other races is sometimes used to justify the oppression, exploitation, or eradication of those groups, as was the case during Western imperialism, colonialism, and slavery.

In "Cora Unashamed," the white people don't care about other races. They are concerned with themselves and their interests. Moreover, when they feel any danger even among their families, they don't hesitate to eradicate it. The story depicts this instance in the relation between Mrs. Studevants and her daughter. When the girl, Jessie, seems "dull" (II. 2) and fails her studies, she is left to the maid, Cora, "like all the unpleasant things in the house" (II. 5). In order to add more credibility to his narration, Hughes criticizes here the white community which behaves conversely; they believe in their perfection. Hence, anything "unpleasant" or imperfect should be left for the

maid to take care of. They make a serious mistake by handing Jessie over to Cora; by doing so, they give Cora the chance to delve into the specifics of their obnoxious and immoral behavior. Additionally, they grant her a means of communication and give her hope that she would be able to carry on with her work despite challenges by finding a substitute for her dead girl. Ironically, Hughes encapsulates their behavior in “they were perfectly right” (I. 7). Indeed, this chance helps Cora and Jessie to have an equal relationship based on honesty and respect; such qualities are lost among the whites according to the context of the story. When this girl, Jessie, becomes pregnant at nineteen by a Greek boy, Mrs. Studevant doesn’t hesitate to abort her in the earlier stage of her pregnancy in order to prevent this affair to continue and be crowned by marriage. Such a conduct shows how the whites behave towards and act against minorities in general. This deed affirms the whites’ cruelty, selfishness and stolidity even when they deal with their relatives, not to mention people from other races. Furthermore, Ozias (2017) stresses that “even in our moments of resistance of racism, women of color are oppressed, further violated, and silenced” (p. 8); all this happens in the story. Leaving her with Cora, her family believe they can discourage her morale and emphasize her imbecility, but they are mistaken. When they notice that she overcomes the obstacle and is determined to live on, obviously with Cora’s assistance, they entrust the task to her mother to put an end to all this, even if it means dying. Jessie, the white “dull” daughter, is therefore restrained, subjected to oppression, and finally silenced.

When Cora becomes pregnant by a white lover, she is not ashamed of that behavior, because it helps her to create something possessed by her. Because she learns that “the Studevants thought they owned her” (I. 7), she thinks that if she owns something, it will change her life. Accordingly, she wants to own, not be owned, and to possess, not to be possessed. She gives birth to a girl named Josephine. When Josephine dies of whooping-cough, Cora curses God for taking away her daughter because she thinks that she has created this girl and possesses her. Consequently, no-one has the right to take her. She looks at everything from such a perspective of possession; either to possess or be possessed. Indeed, this way of thinking is what she has learnt from her milieu.

The death of Cora’s daughter enforces her to search for an alternative. When Jessie is left for her, she finds in Jessie what she needs to fill the gap her daughter’s death has caused. Each one finds in the other something missed; Jessie finds in Cora the mother she has missed, and Cora finds in Jessie the daughter she has lost. Both women are ignored and treated badly by the whites in spite the fact that Jessie is their daughter. Such a community is fickle and moody. When Jessie becomes pregnant, she confides in Cora and tells her. The primitive maid sees nothing in that natural male-female relation as long as the couple intends to marry. Consequently, she tells Jessie’s mother, who takes her daughter to Kansas City to abort her and later denies so. As long as there is no deterrent, the powerful is the one who is heard while the weak is silenced and ignored. The result of this abortion is the death of Jessie, the symbol of innocence as seen by Cora, after a month. Cora must put her livelihood, security, and place in the community at risk in order to speak the truth and respect the memory of the child she took care of, loved and finally lost. Hence, Jessie dies as a result of an abortion that was arranged by her mother, who later lies about the circumstances in order to maintain her social standing. What bothers the mother is how her family looks like in front of the society; she insists on its beliefs even if they are inhuman.

It is the cruelty that causes Jessie’s despair and subsequently her death. The Studevants are also responsible for taking the Greek boy’s father’s license. They don’t stop at this point; they start a campaign to rid the town of questionable people, particularly the Greeks. According to Takaki (2008), the whites view themselves as the only people of “purity, innocence, and goodness” (p. 50). They are ready to accuse any other race of doing wrong. They think that it is their mission to get rid of any extraneous challenge regardless of its origin; the white family punish their daughter’s lover and his family, and the mother aborts the daughter.

On the other hand, Cora’s “Pa” is “a junk wagon” (I. 9). Later, he becomes a drunkard in order to escape his responsibilities towards his family. According to the text, “he spent mostly on the stuff that makes you forget you have eight kids” (I. 9). As a result, his oldest daughter, Cora, takes care of the family. Hence, she lives under pressure from both her family and the family she works for. Later, she has to buy her father a horse, then to get him out of jail. She tries to help her father. Hence, “in Hughes’s *The Ways of White Folks*, for instance, we see “black” people reconstructing themselves” (Keating, 1995, p. 915). So, Hughes has “challenged not only society’s inequalities and constructs” (Lister, 2018, p. 25), but also, he addresses the issue of reconstructing and building the black community from the inside. Indeed, painting a comprehensive picture of the black community and proposing solutions to the problems it faces makes Hughes a unique writer; he writes about the society he lives in and belongs to.

When Cora tells Mrs. Studevant of her daughter’s pregnancy, Mr. Studevant is away in Des Moines. Thus, Mrs. Studevant deals with the situation according to her caprice and pride. Here is another man who leaves everything for his wife and takes care of his own business. The result is his daughter’s death. There must be harmony between the members of the same family, whether here or in Cora’s family. In referring to both fathers, Hughes alludes to a personal story that happened to him when his father left him with his mother, facing their racist destiny in the United States, and fleeing with his flesh from the hell of racism to Mexico.

According to Jessie, her lover is going to marry her but, in the story, she is considered dull and immature by her family. It seems that Hughes wants to compare the whites of American origin with those of other origins, such as the Greeks, who appear to be under the American whites’ mercy. The campaign starts against the questionable people, particularly the Greeks. Here the American whites don’t see anybody equal even those who are white but of another origin. The issue is beyond the color of the skin; it is the origin that matters for the whites.

Apparently, the Studevants try their utmost to move anyone from their way. Everything comes to an end; Cora experiences a lot during her work with the Studevants. Now she has the courage to rebel against their false values and cruelty. Critics look at the “oppressed

peoples as both victimized by the dominant power structure and as capable of resisting or transforming that power structure" (Tyson, 2023, p. 297). At the funeral of Jessie, the Studevants' daughter, Cora announces, "they killed you! And for nothin'... They killed your child" (III. 17). The men appear at this time to stop her violating the whites' laws and restrictions; they take her to the backyard. Donald (1996) argues that "Cora Unashamed" is a "portrait of an isolated black woman" who "in the end lashes out against the hypocrisy of the whites who employ her" (The New York Times). Their hypocrisy is so unbearable that Cora cannot afford any more. At the end, she returns to her "Ma and Pa" after challenging the Studevants and announcing their responsibilities. Thus, Hughes is keen to bring the family together because of its strength and support that transcend everything, especially when needed. Individuals should have people to turn to when necessary, and they should cooperate with each other in order to crown the struggle with liberation and freedom. In this collective sense, we see how Hughes manages to write "on the struggles Black people had to carry on" (Dualé, 2018, p. 11) and has "maintained his commitment to the Black cause all along his career and succeeded in navigating the two worlds of Black and White intelligentsia" (Dualé, 2018, p. 2). According to Kernan (2022), Hughes' commitment to infuse Black voices into his literary works gives them "transnational [fame] in their scope and poetics" (p. 12).

Meanwhile, once Cora had a white lover named Joe. When she became pregnant, "Joe left town" (I. 18). Joe was "big and strong and careless as the horses he took care of" (I. 16). Anyhow, he was an animal; he used her and left the place. But if her daughter didn't die, she might become a bridge between the two races. Yet, her death indicates that there is no bridge left to connect the whites and the blacks. More than this maid's story, the narrative implies that the whites do not hesitate to take action even when the violation of their restrictions is adopted by one of them as depicted in the story of the whites' daughter. After losing Jessie, Cora has nothing to lose more. Hence, she stands up for what she believes in regardless of the consequences.

3. Conclusion

In "Cora Unashamed," Langston Hughes conveys his message about the American Society through the way Cora gets looked at and treated. He depicts the experience she goes through in her relationships with both her black family and the family she works for. The powerful and those in positions of authority take advantage of and utilize the flaws in the institutions and systems. Neither can laws and regulations be perfect nor can they govern emotions and feelings.

As a whole, Hughes's Cora is the black maid who struggles for living first, then for rejecting and challenging false restrictions and values. Though she appears latent at the beginning, she becomes active at the end of the story after having a chance to experience the whites' hypocrisy and clearly see the fake values they claim. Anyhow, there are different attitudes adopted by the whites towards the 'other' in this story, e.g., the Studevants humiliate Cora and consider her an object when she treats their daughter on a basis of equality and respect. On the other hand, the relationships among the whites in this story depend on self-interest and selfishness, such as that of Jessie and her mother whose utmost care is her social status. If this is the type of relationship among the members of the same white race, then the relationship between the whites and the "other" will be devastating as depicted in the story.

Among the black individuals, the relationships are criticized by Hughes as well as depicted in the story of Cora and her family. Though the relations of Cora and Jessie appear true and direct, yet the male-female relationships differ from one case to another: Cora and Joe's relation depends on deceit, cheat and exploitation while Jessie and her lover's relation is based on respect and promise according to Jessie. As stated in the story, the fathers' relationships with their families are passive; they leave their responsibility to women. Cora has a major role in these relationships and this role pushes her to decide at the end to confront false values and restrictions. Of course, there are sacrifices involved in every conflict. Cora will lose the work that provides her and her family with a living. Here, laws fall short, lawmakers do little, and the weak, helpless, and oppressed people are still preoccupied with trying to survive.

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