

‘Cora Unashamed’: Education, Reputation, and Family

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Abstract

*Over the decades, numerous writers have made a concerted effort to address a number of societal norms that have persisted, including injustice, oppression, and cruel treatment. One of those authors is Langston Hughes, who bravely depicts the struggle that Black people actually face in a system dominated by White people in his story ‘Cora Unashamed.’ This covers all aspects of life, including schooling and social status. Learning takes place beyond the classroom. Instead, society and family—where a person is raised, shaped, and indoctrinated—play a major role in his/her education. Hughes includes ‘Cora Unashamed’ in *The Ways of White Folks* (1971). The story's central relationship is that between the white and black races; Cora is a representative of the black people in the narrative, while the Studevants family and their daughter are white. The male-female dynamic in this narrative is noteworthy as well. This essay will examine Hughes' three points of emphasis—education, reputation, and family. The essay tries to clarify such components and how they impact a person's life. They are mixed together and impacted in the same way.*

Keywords: *Cora, black, white, family, reputation, unashamed, Hughes, education.*

1. Introduction

Hughes (1902–1967) was a poet first and foremost. In addition, *The Ways of White Folks* (1934) is one of his prose works. Fourteen short stories that center on racism and other relevant topics in the US make up this literary masterpiece. The methods used by white Americans to oppress Black Americans are illustrated in this collection of stories. Here, Hughes tries to "explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America" (Wei, 2007, p. 129).

One of these significant stories found in *The Ways of White Folks* is ‘Cora Unashamed.’ The story revolves around Cora Jenkins, a maid who works for the Studevants, a White household. Cora assists in raising Jessie, their daughter.

According to Al-Ramahi et al. (2021), "race proves to be highly significant in constructing whiteness and blackness." (p. 670). Cora expresses her thoughts on what is happening during Jessie's burial before leaving the area. In a same spirit, Hooks (1992) contends that "by resisting set norms and challenging the politics of domination based on race, class, and sex" (p. 58), black women including Cora can defend their subjectivity. Furthermore, according to Green (2009), "issues regarding black identity can affect people for generations" (p. 35). Therefore, each African American should do their part to promote positive perceptions of this race. This article will trace education, reputation, and family through the lens of a short story.

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Our social classes have a big impact on our life. A person's social position can be used to categorize and, in some situations, elevate or degrade them. Black maid Cora Jenkins works for the Studevant family in Langston Hughes' 'Cora Unashamed.' In the town of Melton, the Studevant family is portrayed as the wealthy white family, and the Jenkins family as the family of color. The narrative demonstrates the significance of social standing, education, and reputation. Accordingly, individuals vary in the rights they acknowledge, which is why both families lead distinct lifestyles.

The link between education, family, and reputation comes about because the family is an individual's first teacher and is considered to constitute his/her first school; it does care about its reputation and the reputation of all its members. In turn, education may play a role in maintaining status and reputation, and all families are keen to educate all their members because education plays a role in advancement and status.

Indeed, racism and issues pertaining to minorities greatly influence the topics under discussion. This article delves further into 'Cora Unashamed,' examining and analyzing specific significant facets. Furthermore, it is a good idea to revisit writers from a given era and remind readers of their contributions in a particular area.

Discourse analysis will be employed in this paper. This story's text is examined in order to identify the instructional components that the narrative has offered. This essay will mostly use discourse analysis to reveal the various educational ramifications that have shaped and impacted Cora's life in her environment.

'Cora Unashamed' is split into three sections, denoted as I, II, and III. When quoting from the story, both the section and paragraph number—for example, (II. 4)—will be mentioned.

2. Discussion:

2.1. Family

Black maid Cora Jenkins handles all work for the Studevant family. Despite their animalistic treatment of her, "she stood it" (I. 3). They believe they own her, and "they were perfectly right" (I. 7); it is her real situation. She simply wants to live like any oppressed student, so she accepts this humiliation and keeps working; she is forced to accept her current circumstances. She must therefore make ends meet, and in such circumstances, values may be disregarded; life is difficult (Dohal, 2018, p. 673). Anyhow, she is able to make money by working for this white family. Cora learns about cruelty, humiliation, and the general lack of empathy among the White people she works for from her interactions and relationship with this family. The powerful is the one who commands, forbids, thinks, and in fact makes an orgy. As for the weak, s/he has no choice, but to submit and accept. Langston Hughes has "revealed spaces of common people experiencing white racial oppression all around them," (Osburn-Cole, 2020, p.4). His writings have entwined black people's violent and difficult experiences. Their experiences amount to little more than required enrollment in real-world lessons.

Cora's "Pa" is no more than "a junk wagon" (I. 9). He turns into a drunk to get away from his obligations to his family. Without a father, a family could become lost. "He spent mostly on the stuff that makes you forget you have eight kids," the text emphasizes (I. 9). Cora, his oldest daughter, looks after the family as a result. She thus has to deal with pressure from her family as well as the family she works for. She will eventually need to buy her father a horse in order to free him from prison. Her attempt is to assist her father. Thus, "black people [are] reconstructing themselves" in Hughes's *The Ways of White Folks* (Keating, 1995, 915). According to Lister (2018), Hughes has addressed not only "society's inequalities and constructs" (p. 25), but he also tackles the problem of reshaping and constructing the black community from the inside out.

Mr. Studevants is in Des Moines when Cora informs Mrs. Studevants of her daughter's pregnancy. As a result, Mrs. Studevants handles the matter in a way that befits her whim and ego. Here is another man who manages his own business while leaving everything for his wife. His daughter dies as a result. Anyhow, Jessie claims that her true love will marry her, but her family views her as dull and immature in all her reactions.

The Studevants family benefits greatly from their social status. For example, Mrs. Art gets women to speak out against the ice cream that the Greek man is serving to children because of the status she enjoys. Thus, that man loses his license. She acts in this way as a result of her daughter's obsession with the Greek man's son. Mrs. Art feels it is her responsibility to protect the community. Hughes makes it clear that the only people who can express their opinions and lodge grievances against others are those who hold a high social position. Mrs. Art's daughter will never see her beau again because his family is forced to leave the neighborhood. Conversely, Cora is unable to express her opinion because no one will listen to her. Cora tries to defend Jessie, but Mrs. Art silences her:

Scandalization! Oh, my Lord! Jessie was in trouble.

"She ain't in trouble neither," Cora insisted. "No trouble having a baby you want. I had one."

"Shut up, Cora!"

"Yes, m'am. . . . But I had one."

"Hush, I tell you."

"Yes, m'am." (II. 10-15)

At any time, people whose class is low are denied their right of freedom of any kind as depicted in the story of Cora. Either way, Cora isn't like the people in Melton. She is a poor black woman with limited opportunities. She is under the care of the Studevants, who do not think she is any different from an animal.

The loss of her daughter compels her to look for a substitute. She finds in Jessie what she needs to bridge the void left by her daughter's passing when Jessie is left for her. Every individual discovers something they have missed in the other; Jessie discovers in Cora the mother she has missed and can grow from and with. Naturally, Cora can teach Jessie since she is the daughter she never had. Despite the fact that Jessie is their daughter, the White people disregard and mistreat both women. To tell the truth and honor the memory of the child she loved and lost, Cora must jeopardize her job, safety, and standing in the society. Therefore, Jessie ends up dead as a result of an abortion that her mother arranged. She then lies about what happened to preserve her social status; the mother is bothered by the way her family appears to the society and is adamant about its values.

2.2. Education

Black maid Cora Jenkins is not wealthy. She works for the white Studevants and resides in Melton. Cora, "like a tree once rooted," "stood in spite of storms, and strikes, wind, and rocks in the earth" (I. 3). She gains this lesson from her work and experiences, which teach her to struggle and face injustice and persecution no matter the cost is. Her primary teachers end up being the white family. However, we shouldn't disregard the fact that she has been raised in a black family and received her education and life experiences there; her society serves as her primary educational institution.

The residents of any community are profoundly influenced by their education, which can both help and accelerate their advancement. The narrative presents the Studevants family as prosperous and obviously well-educated. The Studevants family is wealthy, and it is expected of their children to lead prosperous lives. Their son, Kenneth, assumes ownership of a hardware company that his grandfather has left. Jack joins a college. The daughter Mary works as an instructor. It is just the little daughter Jessie—her final year of high

school—who is still a child. After a somewhat sluggish nineteen years of study, Jessie finally graduates.

Due to their financial circumstances, the Studevants family has more opportunities to attend college. Because of their education, Mrs. Art seems to think highly of Jack and Mary. Mary, the oldest daughter, is a respected and highly educated teacher. In due course, Jack and Kenneth will be able to sustain themselves financially and choose rewarding careers. Despite their concerns, Jessie, the lazy and young daughter, will be able to attend college like her siblings because she will get the necessary funding to continue her education.

However, Hughes provides an example of how Cora's family's lack of resources has kept her from completing her education: "As a child Cora had no playtime...in the eighth grade she quit school and went to work with the Studevants" (I. 10). Cora does not finish school since she has to support her family financially. Cora's childhood has definitely had less fun than other children's because she has been forced to help her mother with her younger siblings. Eventually, the Jenkins family needs to labor just to get by.

Indeed, Cora is the eldest of "the Jenkins niggers" (I. 9); a family of eight children. She drops out of school in the eighth grade to work for the Studevants family, using her earnings to provide food for her father's kids. She is being loyal and appreciative to her family with this act. Because she knows she will always have her family, this unending relationship gives her the strength to rebel against injustice and persecution in the end. Instructions of her family overcome those of the milieu she lives in. Even though she provides for her family financially, she still depends on their existing and social support to carry on with her struggles and find a way out of any difficult circumstances she encounters. Thus, it is evident that Hughes wants "ultimate freedom for his community" (Trudeau, 2009, p. 59). She realizes that problems she faces are "the same as those of millions of other segregated Negroes" (Hughes, 1947, p. 205). This is the main lesson she learns through her experience; experience teaches more effectively than any school.

The white people in 'Cora Unashamed' do not give a damn about other races. Their priorities are self-interest and self-preservation. Furthermore, they act without hesitation to eliminate any threat, even if it comes from within their own families. This incident in the relationship between Mrs. Studevants and her daughter is portrayed in the story. Jessie, the little girl, is left to the maid Cora, who treats her "like all the unpleasant things in the house" (II. 5) after she appears "dull" (II. 2) and does not perform her studies convincingly. In fact, Cora's and Jessie's equal relationship is based on honesty and respect; the story's context suggests that white people are losing these attributes. Mrs. Studevants doesn't think twice to have Jessie, a nineteen-year-old girl, aborted early in her pregnancy by a Greek boy, so as to keep this affair from culminating in marriage. This act validates the white people's indifference, avarice, and stolidity—even toward their own relatives and other racial groups as well. In addition, Ozias (2017) emphasizes that "women of color are oppressed, further violated, and silenced" (p. 8); all of this takes place in the narrative. Cora is able to establish a classroom with two people by observing how the white family treats their daughter. She manages to attract Jessie to her side. Hence, Jessie trusts and learns from Cora how to handle her affairs.

Cora is angry with God for stealing her daughter because she believes she created and owns the girl. As such, nobody is entitled to take her. She views everything through the lens of possession—either having something or being something. She has, in fact, picked up this way of thinking from her environment—the white family; she is the learner here. They treat her as an owned object. All these things she learns from her environment

White people believe they are the only ones who possess "purity, innocence, and goodness," according to (Takaki, 2008, p. 50). Some teachers might choose to adopt this look. They're prepared to accuse people of any other race as a result. They believe that eliminating unnecessary challenges is their duty—this is what Mrs. Art does. She believes

in her 'whitness' and accordingly she does her utmost due to such a perspective. Yet, her action leads to the death of her daughter Jessie.

It seems that the Studevants make every effort to push people out of their path. Everything has an end, and Cora gained a lot of experience working with the Studeviant family. She now possesses the bravery to rebel against their harshness and false ideals. Cora declares, "They killed you!" at Jessie's funeral, and "they killed your child" (III. 17). At this point, the men show up to stop her from breaking the rules and laws that apply to White people, and they lead her to the backyard. As per Donald's (1996) analysis, 'Cora Unashamed' presents a "portrait of an isolated Black woman" that ultimately exposes the hypocrisy of the white people who hire her (The New York Times). Cora can no longer stand their hypocrisy. It is intolerable. She challenges the Studeviant family and declares their responsibilities before returning to her Ma and Pa at the end. As a result, we can observe how Hughes has managed to write about the struggles that Black people had to endure and has continued to be committed to the Black cause throughout his career (Dualé, 2018, p. 11).

2.3. Reputation

Social standing is important. Hence, high social class maintains more privileges. A person from a lower socioeconomic class named Cora works for the Studeviant family in the story. However, because of her social standing, Mrs. Art serves as a model for the community. Due to the fact that Mrs. Art is the woman's club president for three years in a row, a pillar of her church, and Melton's civic and social leader, she is therefore "always a little ashamed of stupid Jessie [her daughter]" (II. 3). She is well-known in the town and worries that her dimwitted daughter may damage the reputation of her family. She worries about what other people may think of her family.

A lot of people, particularly those from lower socioeconomic classes, think highly of their reputation since it affects how other people see them. Many people have an intense fixation on their reputations and are quite protective of them. Both Mrs. Art and Pa Jenkins, Cora's father, are fixated on their reputations and the comments made about their families. Upon learning that his daughters have become unwed mothers, Pa Jenkins initially comes across as humiliated, saying, "One by one, the girls left too, mostly in disgrace. Ruin ma name," (I. 13) Pa Jenkis remarks. He stresses that "they can't go out berryin' but they come back in disgrace" (I. 13).

Pa Jenkins is not a social leader and belongs to the lower class in the community, unlike Mrs. Art. However, he considers his daughters' pregnancies to be an embarrassment; he finds this to be improper behavior. Even those from lower socioeconomic strata worry about their social image. Rather, the name 'Cora unashamed' implies that Cora doesn't care what other people think or feel bad about her unwed pregnancy. She does not consider her daughter to be a shame. Cora does not believe that reputation is important, in contrast to her father, Pa Jenkins, and Mrs. Art.

Pa Jenkins and the Studevants are both concerned about their reputations in their own way, despite their social differences. He does not care about taking care of his family and helping them financially as much as he does about getting his daughters pregnant without getting married. At the same time, Mrs. Art Studeviant does not care about the consequences of the actions she commits and the behavior she adopts against other ethnicities. By the time the narrative reaches its conclusion, Cora has exposed everything; Jessie is a victim of her family. Due to being coerced into having an abortion, Jessie passes away. Cora is therefore able to hold onto her genuine self and withstand the Studevants' attempts to shatter her spirit.

3. Conclusion:

In "Cora Unashamed," Langston Hughes uses Cora's treatment and perception to illustrate his points about American society. He paints a picture of the experiences she has in her relationships with the white family she works for and her black family. All relationships have to do with family, reputation, and education and these three elements overlap in making relationships and defining their frameworks.

All things considered, Hughes' Cora is the black maid who fights first to survive, then to reject and oppose unjustified limitations and ideals. Even though she first comes across as dormant, she awakens at the conclusion of the narrative to confront the hypocrisy of the white people and their false ideals. In any case, the White people in this story have different attitudes toward the "other." For example, the Studevants treat Cora like an object and degrade her when she treats their daughter equally and with respect. Conversely, the relationships between the White characters in this story—like the one between Jessie and her mother, whose primary concern is her social status—are based on self-interest and selfishness. The relationship between the White people and the "other," as portrayed in the story, will be disastrous if this is the kind of relationship that exists between members of the same race.

While Jessie and her lover's relationship is built on respect and promise, Cora and Joe's relationship is based on deceit, cheating, and exploitation. The narrative portrays the fathers as having passive relationships with their families, delegating their responsibilities to the women. Cora plays a significant role in these relationships, and this role ultimately forces her to choose to face limiting beliefs and expectations. All of these relationships are mixed with the family and its importance, as well as with the individual's readiness to learn from what is around him/her, their view of their image in the eyes of others.

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