

Not Without Laughter Study Guide

Not Without Laughter by Langston Hughes

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Plot Summary

In *Not without Laughter*, Langston Hughes, the great early twentieth century American novelist, poet and playwright, presents the story of Sandy Rogers, a young black boy in the early 1900s growing up in the Midwest. Hughes aims to tell the story of black American life in the mid-west within two generations following slavery. He sets the story in Stanton, Kansas and focuses on the relations between blacks and whites, the tensions between different philosophies of living with oppression, the subtle and not-so-subtle racist social norms of Midwestern white society, poverty, religion and the possibility of a black person improving his or her position within a white society.

Sandy is a young boy when the story begins. He lives with his mother, Annjee, his aunt Harriet and his grandmother Aunt Hager. His father, Jimboy, travels the country working odd jobs and rarely writing home. His other aunt, Tempy, has married into black high-society that attempts to imitate whites to become acceptable to white society. In part due to a lack of education and in part due to direct discrimination against blacks, Sandy's family is very poor.

Aunt Hager is the family matriarch. She is a seriously religious Christian who tries to keep the family in church and well-behaved. She remembers being a slave as a little girl, but her general attitude towards white society is that oppressed is to be endured with love for the neighbor and prayer and forgiveness for the oppressor. She is also largely responsible for raising Sandy, particularly after Annjee leaves to be with Jimboy. Sandy's Aunt Harriett leaves home after a conflict with Aunt Hager and becomes a prostitute, while Tempy will hardly give her family the time of day. Aunt Hager is determined to raise Sandy right and keeps him employed and in school. She pushes Sandy to dream big for himself despite the odds against him and wants him to become a "great man".

When Aunt Hager dies, Annjee cannot afford to move Sandy to Detroit, where she and Jimboy live at the time, so Sandy goes to live with his Aunt Tempy. Tempy is embarrassed by her lower-class black past and has removed all of her "dialect" and goes to the Episcopal Church with her husband. She discourages Sandy from getting in trouble and keeps him in high school. The large number of books in her house gives Sandy the opportunity to read, and he quickly acquires a habit of constantly reading. The books he reads expand his mind and lead him to ask big questions about religion, morality and race relations.

Eventually Annjee saves up enough money to send for Sandy; Jimboy has gone to Europe in World War I and Annjee has found Sandy a job as a bell-boy. Sandy saves up money to continue his education, but Annjee wants him to keep his job as a bell-boy and make a living. About that time, Harriett has made her way out of darker places and has utilized her natural beauty and singing talent to become a regional blues singing star. When Sandy and Annjee go to see her in Chicago, Harriett berates Annjee for discouraging Sandy's education and reminds her of Aunt Hager's dreams for him. When Annjee relents, Harriett commits to funding Sandy's education.



Chapters 1-3, Storm, Conversation, Jimboy's Letter

Chapters 1-3, Storm, Conversation, Jimboy's Letter Summary and Analysis

"Storm" introduces Aunt Hager and her grandson Sandy preparing for a cyclone that is hitting their neighborhood. At the beginning of the story, Aunt Hager is desperately trying to get Sandy and herself into her cellar and get the door shut. When the storm passes, her house is gone, but she and her neighbor thank God things weren't worse. After meeting with a few more people in town, they hear that two rich white people in the neighborhood, the Gavitts, had been killed. Aunt Hager was a nurse whose services were needed so she tended to their family. Then Sandy's mother, Annjee, turns up to find Sandy and the three of them return home. Annjee's husband, Jimboy, hasn't written in three weeks. Aunt Hager thinks he's worthless, but Annjee and Sandy love him and Annjee prays for him to return.

In broad strokes, Storm concerns the normal reaction of townspeople to a cyclone in a black and white town. The black people immediately tend to the white people who are hysterical; the black people have to fend for themselves.

"Conversation" records a conversation between Aunt Hager and Sister Whiteside. They primarily talk about their children and grandchildren, about their lives and complain about how they never write. While they cover many details, one thing that comes out very clearly is the class structure in the town of Stanton where they live. First, they talk about Sandy and Sandy's friend Buster, who was half-black and probably had a white father. Of Hager's three daughters, Tempy, Annjee and Harriett, only Annjee sees Hager regularly.

Tempy and her husband have done well financially and have stopped hanging around lower-class blacks with darker skin. Instead, they quit the black Baptist church they went to and started going to the white Episcopalian church where "better" people go. In general, it becomes clear that Stanton largely has three social classes, whites, lower class and mostly darker blacks, and then lighter-skinned middle class blacks. Middle class blacks often seek to distinguish themselves from lower-class blacks to gain the approval of whites. They will do a lot for this form of social recognition, even ignoring their family and changing churches.

In "Jimboy's Letter", Annjee receives a note from Jimboy saying that he'd been laying railroad in Kansas City and had hurt his back so he was coming home. Aunt Hager thought he was lying and thought he never did any work. But Annjee knows that he really was doing work. Jimboy was probably trying to outdo the Greeks in the work gang he was a part of when he hurt his back. In fact, while Jimboy could be irresponsible, he was a handsome man and always entertained so that no one was ever bored or lonely

when he was around. He brought in some money, and he would have to do that outside of Stanton anyway.

In Stanton, there was almost no work for black people; immigrants came in and took away their jobs, and so a man could work in Stanton his whole life without saving enough money to retire and leave something behind (Aunt Hager's husband had suffered this fate). Throughout the chapter, it is quite clear that Annjee misses Jimboy but knows that he's a "travellin'" man who doesn't like to stay in one place. She believes he married her because she was a homebody and would take care of a house. She was happy to do so to have him.



Chapters 4-6, Thursday Afternoon, Guitar, Work

Chapters 4-6, Thursday Afternoon, Guitar, Work Summary and Analysis

On Thursday afternoon, Hager's youngest daughter Harriet comes home to visit. She decided to quit her job as a waitress because white men harassed her too much and asked her to sleep with them. Instead, she wanted to get a job as a chambermaid at a hotel making good money. Harriet was pretty and was young enough to still be hostile to Hager, in her teenage years perhaps. The entire chapter consists of a conversation between Harriet and Hager.

Harriet doesn't want to follow Christianity as Hager demands that she do. She thinks that Christianity makes black people stuck up and unable to have fun. She thinks of Jesus as "stiff" and "white" and notes that Tempy spends all her time in church but that this just makes her stuck up and arrogant. Instead, Harriet wants to spend her time dancing and having fun with boys. Hager demands that she start acting like a Christian again, but Harriet ignores her. Hager breaks down when Harriet is about to leave with a bunch of boys and begs for her to be good. Harriet walks out.

In "Guitar", Jimboy has come home and is playing his guitar and singing. Harriet is singing with him, as they have done since she was a little girl when Jimboy would come home. Jimboy sings many songs that he has learned from across the country, including the blues. Annjee is hurt that when Jimboy comes home he starts singing with Harriet and doesn't say a word to her. She makes him food and he doesn't seem interested in eating it, but eventually he puts down the guitar and sets her on his lap and eats. Annjee is happy.

"Work" begins with Jimboy and Sandy fishing. They're clearly glad to spend some time together. Jimboy wouldn't be working that day since he'd been laid off due to the fact that white men refused to work alongside a black man. After fishing, Sandy had to run off and help his mother, who was cooking at the Rice's, a rich white family.

Sandy saw that his mother worked very hard and that Mrs. Rice, the blond, skinny white woman, was constantly telling Sandy what to do and criticizing her and condescending to her when she had the chance. Sandy complains to Sandy that these white people are so particular and babied, pampered as they were by their black servants.

Sandy cries when he sees his mother sweating and Mrs. Rice taking such ruthless advantage of her. When they get home, Annjee was happy to have the evening since black people had to give their day "to white folks".



Chapters 7-9, White Folks, Dance, Carnival

Chapters 7-9, White Folks, Dance, Carnival Summary and Analysis

"White folks" hones in on the racial struggles of the black people of Stanton. The entire chapter consists of stories about how the main characters suffered under the white men where they lived. Harriet wasn't permitted to sit with her white classmates at school and her white girlfriends wouldn't be seen with her after school. Jimbo was fired because the white union members complained, and then he wasn't allowed to join the union. Aunt Hager argued that they shouldn't hate white people but pray for them, but Harriet refused, instead insisting on hating white people. They also note the lack of spirituality of white people and how they don't treat blacks in a Christian way.

But old Sister Johnson had the worst story of all. She had lived through slavery, and after being freed, she and a large number of other blacks started up a town called Crowville. They worked hard and sold their cotton, making money, improving their homes and acquiring furniture and the like. The white people near the area were furious at the Crowville blacks for "acting white", and one day when a rich black man, John Lowdins, bought a car and drove it to Crowville, a drunk white man attacked him. Lowdins shot him in the shoulder and drove off. That night the white people came in, evicted the blacks of Crowville and burned down their town.

In "Dance", Aunt Hager has to run off to tend to Sister Land, who had a hemorrhage. While Aunt Hager was gone, Harriet's boyfriend Mingo showed up and asked Harriet to come to a dance with him. Harriet said she couldn't leave without Sandy. Sandy volunteered to go with them, so Harriet got ready and the three went to the dance. The dance was wild, full of jazz, blues and folk songs played by a small band of four men. Lots of lyrics are printed.

Harriet and Mingo danced the night away and Sandy eventually fell asleep in a loft. When he woke up, everyone was gone except a few people, including Harriet and Mingo, who rushed Sandy home, hoping that Aunt Hager wasn't up. But when they got home, Aunt Hager was sitting on the front step with a bundle of switches at her feet.

"Carnival" begins with Hager and her family splitting up, with some going to the revival and some going to the carnival a half mile down the road. Hager and Annjee went to the revival, while Harriet and Jimbo went to the carnival. Sandy was able to go to the carnival after a while, but stepped on a rusty nail that went in his toe and later got terribly infected.

Nonetheless, the three had fun at the carnival and eventually went home. Sandy had to have his wound tended to and then he fell asleep. Harriet had been on bad terms with



Aunt Hager because Hager had whipped her after the dance and that night she came home late, packed her bags and ran off with the circus. Sandy knew and told Harriet he wouldn't tell on her.



Chapters 10-12, Punishment, School, Hard Winter

Chapters 10-12, Punishment, School, Hard Winter Summary and Analysis

In "Punishment", Sandy often received a nickel to put in the collection plate at church. But Sandy and Buster hadn't been putting their nickels in the collection plate; instead, they bought candy with their money. One hot day, Sandy's candy melted and stained his shirt, which gave him away to Aunt Hager. She asked him where he got the nickel for the candy and Sandy lied to her. When she caught him lying, she was going to whip him until Jimboy came in and chastised him for being a liar. Sandy was so hurt that he went to his bed and cried all afternoon.

In "School", the summer ends and Sandy has to go back to school to the fifth grade, which was integrated. When he reached school, the teacher segregated him and two colored girls in his class. That day Sandy almost won the spelling bee. Afterwards, they had to buy their books and Sandy looked forward to coming home and showing Jimboy his nature reader, but when he got home Hager showed him that his father had left without saying goodbye. Sandy was devastated.

"Hard Winter" takes the family from September to December. After Jimboy's disappearance, he isn't heard from the entire rest of the year. Sandy and Annjee are desperate to hear from him, hoping the mailman would bring them something each day, but nothing comes. Annjee gets very sick and can't work, so Hager has to pick up extra laundry washing to keep the family financially afloat. Sandy continues in school, and is learning to read well. Hager is determined to get him through high school and make him into "the next Booker T. Washington".

The winter that was coming was supposed to be very cold, and many of the elder townspeople die as a result. Sister Johnson and Hager have long conversation about how many black men in the area beat their wives and how at least Jimboy didn't do that. Towards the end of the year, Annjee recovers, and they receive a letter from Harriet asking for fare to come home from Memphis, Tennessee.



Chapters 13-15, Christmas, Return, One by One

Chapters 13-15, Christmas, Return, One by One Summary and Analysis

"Christmas" brings a sad Christmas. Annjee has to give up the money she was saving for Sandy's Christmas to mail to Harriet. Jimboy hasn't sent word. Annjee is still too sick to work and so Hager, Annjee and Sandy are very poor, so poor that they can't afford a wreath or cake icing. Sandy really wants a sled, but the best his mother can do is to get Mr. Logan to build him one. Sandy saw his mother bring it over and had to fake being happy about it, despite being terribly disappointed.

On Christmas Day, Tempy comes over and gives them presents. Hager asks her how she likes her church and she glows over how dignified her pastor is and how there is nothing "niggerish" about the church at all, and so she likes it very much. She then leaves, and everyone is relieved. Tempy gave Sandy a beautiful book of Andersen's Fairy Tales but Sandy is so upset by how nice it is that he throws it under the stove. Hager whips him, allowing Sandy to let out the tears he had been holding back all day.

In "Return", Annjee is finally able to go back to work, though she was not totally well. Sandy happily passed to fifth grade and the family was very proud of him. Annjee still had not heard from Jimboy, but Harriet came home. Everyone was happy to see her, especially Hager. But she seemed thinner and it wasn't clear how she had made her way after quitting the carnival. They had refused to pay her and she had to find a job but she didn't say what. After some greeting, Harriet goes off to stay with Maudel, who she says she'll be living with.

In "One by One", Annjee finally receives word from Jimboy, who was working in Detroit. At Christmas, he had been broke in St. Paul. It was late March and Annjee decided that she was going to save up her money and go to Detroit to be with Jimboy all the time. She'd leave Sandy with Aunt Hager. Hager was deeply upset, and exclaimed that all her children were leaving her "one by one" but that she'd raise Sandy right.

Mid-chapter, Sandy wonders if he could ever be white and whether the Lord even cared if someone was black or white, or male or female. He knew that Jesus was white but he'd learned that God loves everyone. He also noticed that his reader showed black Africans as ugly but that he knew very dark people who weren't ugly at all.

In the spring, Annjee worked hard to save up her money. But for ten years she worked hard to support her family and to see Jimboy only a few weeks a year. So before the flowers bloomed, Annjee left for Detroit.



Chapters 16-18, Nothing but Love, Barber-Shop, Children's Day

Chapters 16-18, Nothing but Love, Barber-Shop, Children's Day Summary and Analysis

In "Nothing but Love," Annjee has been gone for some time. The summer passes and Sandy keeps growing. He and Hager spent a lot of time together and they talk about many things—God, love, and the like. But the chapter largely consists of Hager telling Sandy that while slavery was very bad, it wasn't all bad. Not all white people were cruel to blacks, and in those days white people at least had to feed black people rather than paying them less than they needed to eat.

Hager then tells the story of her plantation and her life growing up there. She grew up playing with the mistress's daughter and they were good friends. When she grew up, the plantation owner, Mr. Jeanne, left for the Civil War and died. Miss Jeanne was devastated. When the slaves were freed, everyone left but Miss Jeanne and Hager, and Hager took care of her until she walked off her balcony thinking her husband had come home.

Towards the end of the chapter, Hager tells Sandy that she stayed because she loved Miss Jeanne and wanted to help her. She argues that while whites hate blacks and blacks hate whites, hatred makes the soul ugly; in the end, she claims, in the world there is room for "nothing but love".

"Barber-Shop" continues Sandy's growth and spending time close to Hager. Sandy doesn't mind keeping Hager company and helps when he can. Sometimes he plays. When the summer ends, he goes back to school. One day, Mr. Logan recommends that he get a job at the barber-shop. Sandy goes to work during the winter and overhears many stories and meets many people, learning to make jokes and shine shoes. The chapter mostly concerns the men in town talking about which women are pretty and which aren't, what color they are and so on.

A carnival opens in town in "Children's Day". To popularize the carnival, the carnival owners place coupons in the paper; if children bring them for "children's day" they can get free lemonade. But when Sandy goes with his colored friends, they are barred from going in because of their race. Sandy, Willie-Mae and the others are furious, humiliated and hurt. When they go home, Sister Johnson is furious too, but Hager says there's no point to it, to forgive them and move on. Then Sandy receives a note from his mother saying that she and Jimboy are doing well, though Jimboy broke his guitar and rent is so high that it is hard to save money. Sandy is glad his family is doing well.



Chapters 19-21, Ten Dollars and Costs, 'Hey, Boy!', Note to Harriett

Chapters 19-21, Ten Dollars and Costs, 'Hey, Boy!', Note to Harriett Summary and Analysis

Two major events happen in "Ten Dollars and Costs". First, Sandy is offered a job working as a bell-hops assistant at Drummer's hotel. While Hager thinks that bad things go on at hotels and doesn't want Sandy to work there, she recognizes that he needs the money and tells him to be good. When he quits his job, his boss gets mad at him. One day after coming home from the hotel, Sandy finds Hager reading the evening paper; she sees an article claiming that Harriett and Maudel have been arrested for prostitution and fined "ten dollars and costs". Hager is devastated, and Sandy doesn't know what street-walking is.

In "Hey, Boy!", Sandy likes his job at the hotel; he is largely responsible for shoe shines and keeping the five hotel spittoons clean, but he enjoys cleaning things, as Aunt Hager did. While working at the hotel, though, he did encounter various forms of immorality, one time seeing Harriet with a man she was probably hired to have sex with. On another occasion, he saw a white woman naked in her room.

But the worst incident was when he was shining the shoes of a drunken bunch of white men when one of them, a Southerner, told Sandy to dance for money. Sandy said he didn't know how and then the Southerner complained that "Kansas niggers" were too big for their britches and grabbed Sandy. Sandy yelled loudly and threw his shoe shining equipment at the white men. Then he ran out of the hotel.

In "Note to Harriett", Sandy is travelling to the "Bottoms", or the red-light district of Stanton. He finds Harriet at her whorehouse all dressed up and gives her a message from Tempy telling her to come home because Hager is very sick and is not expected to live. The story then flashes back two days when Sandy came home from work and found Aunt Hager lying down during the day, which was unheard of behavior from her. She said that she was very sick and Sandy let some of the neighbors know.

Eventually all kinds of people came over, old black women, the white people she worked for, the doctor and so on. Tempy came too, though Sandy didn't much like that. Tempy sent Sandy to wire Annjee to let her know that Hager was sick but the telegraph people said that the address was no good. Then Tempy sent Sandy to find Harriett, bringing the chapter full circle.



Chapters 22-24, Beyond the Jordan, Tempy's House, A Shelf of Books

Chapters 22-24, Beyond the Jordan, Tempy's House, A Shelf of Books Summary and Analysis

In "Beyond the Jordan", Hager remains sick and gets worse. The doctor tells the family that it won't be long and Sandy exchanges some kind words with her grandmother, who wishes him well. She dies and a large funeral is held with Tempy's high-class friends and Harriett's friends from the Bottums. Hager was eulogized in the newspaper as "respected by many white families in the community". After the service, Tempy and Sister Johnson cleaned up the house. They received a note from Annjee saying that she and Jimboy had moved to Toledo and both had jobs; Tempy responded by telling Annjee that they buried her mother and that she was taking Sandy with her.

Tempy took Sandy (or 'James' as she called him) to her house to live; they left Harriett to street-walking. Sandy was sad to go.

When Sandy arrives at "Tempy's House", she gives him a room of his own with its own dresser, closet and bed; there was also a bathroom upstairs with running water; Sandy had never had such access before. In fact, Tempy and her husband Mr. Arkins Siles, did quite well for themselves.

Tempy had worked for a progressive white women fighting for women's suffrage and had learned to speak like her and read her books. Her husband had similar experiences. They had both saved enough money to buy houses and Tempy's employer had left her a home as a token of her appreciation.

Tempy and Arkins were desperate to hide their low-class black past and believed that to get respect, one had to act like white people, dress like white people, eat like white people and earn money as white people did. All of their friends had similar "low-class" black backgrounds and none ever spoke about it. They avoided revivals, singing all the time and most of all never ate watermelon. And Tempy constantly corrected his speech so that white people wouldn't hear. She never spoke of her family and had even been embarrassed of Hager because she wore an apron wherever she went.

In "A Shelf of Books", Sandy becomes accustomed to living with Tempy. He came down with the mumps for three weeks and started reading all of her books and magazines, one of which contained the writings of W. E. B. DuBois that moved him. He read voraciously and went to high school, making Tempy especially proud. At his job at Mrs. Prentiss's gift-card and printer shop, he was able to find even more books to read. He took Latin, English and had excellent teachers. He even won the freshman essay contest. He brought five dollars home to the family and gave the gold medal he won to a



black girl in his school named Pansetta Young, who he had feelings for. He would walk her half way home each day before going to his job.

He only occasionally saw his old neighborhood and heard nothing from his mother, Jimboy or Harriett (who was now on stage in Kansas City). And he only sometimes saw his friends, who Tempy tried to keep him away from. But one day Buster made fun of him for reading so much and dared him to come out and play pool rather than finishing up Moby Dick.



Chapters 25-27, Pool Hall, The Doors of Life, Beware of Women

Chapters 25-27, Pool Hall, The Doors of Life, Beware of Women Summary and Analysis

In 'Pool Hall', Sandy is glad to get away from Tempy, as she was visiting a Midwest Colored Women's Club. The Pool Hall in the summer was lively and full of black people, as they were not allowed to go to many other recreational areas. Many black men tried to out-brag and out-lie one another's tales of their youthful exploits, run-ins with the law, gun-fights and the like. Sandy listens in and has a good time. But when he tires of this, he buys the Chicago Defender, the World's Greatest Negro Weekly and found an article about his Aunt Harriet. In St. Louis she had become something of a minor famous figure as a sensational young blues-singer.

In 'The Doors of Life' Sandy is a softmore in high school. World War I has started and Tempy is helping out in the hopes that if blacks and whites work together for victory that whites will respect blacks and treat them better. Sandy is still studying but he is also spending time with friends and is—somewhat unofficially—dating Pansetta. The more he read the more thoughtful he became and the more questions he asked himself. Why were black men treated as inferior to whites? Why was sex before marriage wrong? Should a black person simply endure oppression and wait for heaven like Aunt Hager did or try to live right here and right now? Sandy decided that he wanted to live.

In fact, Sandy was wondering more and more about sex and Tempy had given him a book about it called The Doors of Life written by a white Presbyterian Minister from New England. The book didn't help Sandy; in fact, he rebelled against it because he thought some white minister could never understand what he and his friends endured.

In 'Beware of Women' Tempy complains that Sandy is hanging out with the wrong crowd and that Pansetta wasn't good enough for him. Mr. Siles and Tempy warned Sandy to 'beware of women' because lower-class women would try to get him to get them pregnant so he would have to marry them; they could then 'move up' in life. They said that Pansetta was too low class. Sandy initially revolved at the demand not to date Pansetta and withdrew from her for three weeks, refraining from walking her home. But then she started to walk home with other guys.

Over those three weeks, Sandy was jealous and began to think that Tempy was the villain rather than Pansetta. One day, working at Mrs. Prentiss's, he dropped his broom and ran over to her house. His older friend, Jimmy Lane, a bell-hop at the hotel was sitting inside with Pansetta. Sandy was uncomfortable, made up a reason that he stopped by and started to leave for home. Jimmy came back with him. On the way, Jimmy mentioned that Sandy had 'had' Pansetta for a year, and Sandy said he never touched her. Jimmy said that he was a fool because Pansetta was "easy as hell."



Chapters 28-30, Chicago, Elevator, Princess of the Blues

Chapters 28-30, Chicago, Elevator, Princess of the Blues Summary and Analysis

In "Chicago", Sandy receives word from Annjee that she finally has the money for his fare to Chicago and that she needed his help since Jimboy was gone. She said that she had found him a job working as a bell-hop at a Chicago hotel. Sandy was excited and wanted to get away from Tempy, who he thought was too "tight". Before he left, he said goodbye to the Sileses. Tempy was sad to see him go because she thought he could make something of himself but rejected the resources she offered him. He also saw Sister Johnson again and enjoyed listening to her talk about the people he had grown up with. He was excused from school and given credit to transfer.

His journey to Chicago had excited him, but when he arrived and took the town car with his mother, he found Chicago less glamorous than the old black men in Stanton had described to him. Eventually they reached the "black belt" of the city, and Sandy was still vaguely disappointed. He unpacked and then went to his job, but on the way he was accosted by a gay man and he had to run from him. Finally he arrived, checked in, went to his mother's apartment and fell asleep.

In "Elevator", Sandy settled into a groove as a bell-hop. But each night his mother would cry because she had no news from Jimboy. Sandy tried to save enough to return to high school, but it was very difficult. Eventually he started to find work at the hotel monotonous. He decided for himself that he would be like Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington and get his education despite being impoverished. He wanted to be more like Harriet, refusing to conform to the white folks' ways of perceiving him. His mother didn't want him to return to school, but he remembered Aunt Hager telling him that she wanted him to be a great man. Sandy resolves not to let her down.

In "Princess of the Blues", Sandy and Annjee hear that Harriett is giving a show downtown. When they arrive, the crowd is full of energy, laughing loudly at the opening acts. When Harriett appears on stage, she blows the crowd away. Sandy is amazed, and Annjee is much less so. Afterwards, Sandy and Annjee go to Harriett's dressing room. They have a tearful greeting and talk together. On their way to get a bit to eat, Sandy's school comes up and Annjee again discourages Sandy.

But Harriett revolts against her sister's discouragement. She reminds Annjee of Aunt Hager's great dreams for Sandy and that in a white man's world, black people cannot let brains go to waste. Sandy will have his education, she maintained; he is to make himself something and help the cause of black people everywhere. Sandy exclaims that he wants to and Harriett pledges to help him out with the money he needs. Annjee ultimately relents.



Characters

Sandy Rogers

James "Sandy" Rogers is the main character of *Not without Laughter*. The book begins with Sandy still a young boy, just starting school. He lives with his mother Annjee and his grandmother Aunt Hager. His father, Jimboy, works jobs on the road far away from home, rarely writes and sees Sandy little. Aunt Hager and Jimboy have an antagonistic relationship. Despite admiring Aunt Hager, Sandy loves it when Jimboy comes home because he plays his guitar and everyone has a good time.

Early on, Sandy shows himself to not only have a good character but to be an excellent student as well. He learns quickly and makes good grades in his courses, allowing him to advance in school. While Annjee is too focused on Jimboy to encourage Sandy's schoolwork, Aunt Hager stands behind him and motivates him to continue his schoolwork, to work part-time jobs and to stay in church.

When Annjee leaves to be with Jimboy, Sandy lives alone with Aunt Hager. She keeps him busy in his school work and wants him to be a great man. She also gives Sandy a lot of attention and tries to keep him out of trouble. When she dies, Sandy goes to live with Aunt Tempy, who he finds uptight and too eager to please white people. But she introduces him to the world of books and provides him a good education. Sandy's intellectual strengths come to the fore, and towards the end of the book he is thinking hard about religion, morality and race relations. As the book ends, Harriett, who is now a blues singer, commits to financing his education.

Aunt Hager Williams

Aunt Hager Williams grew up under slavery on a plantation in the South. She is an ardent Christian believer and tries her best to keep her family in church. Aunt Hager also strongly dislikes Jimboy for not being a responsible husband and chides her daughter, Annjee, for marrying him. Aunt Hager often regrets the ways her daughters turned out - Harriett is too disobedient, stops going to church and eventually becomes a prostitute, Tempy is too stuck-up and embarrassed by her "low-class" black past; even her piety has become about pleasing white people, and Annjee cares only about Jimboy who takes advantage of her.

Because of this, Aunt Hager is determined to do the best she can for Sandy and encourages him to stay and school and believes that if he wants, he can become a great man. Despite not being able to read very well and speaking a thick Southern black dialect, Aunt Hager is a major proponent of education.

Aunt Hager's Christian belief is an important feature of her character. She also argues that if blacks hate white people, it will corrupt their souls and that everyone who wrongs you must be forgiven and prayed for. When the slaves were set free on Aunt Hager's



plantation, she stayed behind to comfort and care for the plantation owner's wife because she loved her. Aunt Hager also focuses mostly on her spiritual life and connection to Jesus and discourages worrying too much about white oppression in this life because it won't exist in the next. Sandy comes to be concerned that Aunt Hager simply accepted this mode of approaching oppression because in her day she had no alternative.

Annjee Rogers

Sandy's mother, Jimboy's wife and Aunt Hager's daughter, Annjee is madly in love with Jimboy and seems largely indifferent to her son, Sandy. Eventually she leaves Sandy with Aunt Hager to be with Jimboy, who otherwise rarely wrote to her.

Jimboy Rogers

Sandy's father, who has trouble holding down a job and travels the country to find work. He hardly ever writes home and makes almost no money at all. Despite this, he is a fun-loving man who always brings a good time with him wherever he goes. When he is home, he spends time with Sandy and fights with Aunt Hager.

Aunt Harriett Williams

Harriett is the youngest of Aunt Hager's three daughters and the most headstrong. Eventually she leaves home when Aunt Hager whipped her for taking Sandy to an all-night dance with her boyfriend. She then takes up prostitution in the "Bottoms" of Stanton and Aunt Hager is devastated. While Harriett is gone for some time, she eventually becomes a minor celebrity as a talented blues singer. When Sandy runs into her again, she encourages him to follow the dreams Aunt Hager had for him. Harriett also strongly rejects Aunt Hager's "accommodationist" strategy of dealing with oppression and refuses, unlike Tempy, to conform to the expectations white society has of her.

Aunt Tempy Siles

The oldest of the three Williams sisters, Aunt Tempy did her best to lose her black "dialect" and learn to read when working for a progressive suffragette. When the woman died, she left Tempy one of her homes; Tempy has already saved money to have a home of her own. She then married Mr. Siles, who was also educated and reasonably well-off. Together, they did their best to hide their "low-class" black pasts and to act more like white people so that blacks would be treated better. In general, she pursues an "assimilationist" strategy of ignoring what was unique about black culture and she discourages Sandy from having any ties to the "low-class" black community. She even stopped going to the Baptist Church for the Episcopal one that had a more "refined" minister.



Buster

One of Sandy's childhood friends who he remains friends with until he leaves for Chicago. Buster is a bit wild and makes fun of Sandy's interest in reading.

The Baptist Church

Aunt Hager is a strong, believing Baptist and takes her family to church whenever she can; she also takes them to revival meetings when the revival comes to town.

Pansetta Young

A pretty young girl that Sandy dates for a year. However, he never touches her and won't be alone in a room with her. When Tempy discourages him from spending time with her, he withdraws and she started dating other boys. But Sandy really likes her and becomes jealous; when he goes to confess his love for her, he finds out from his friend Jimmy, her new boyfriend, that she was "easy" and he lost interest.

Booker T. Washington

The famous black scientist that Aunt Hager strongly admired; Tempy criticized him for being, ironically, too accommodating to whites, preferring W. E. B. DuBois. Sandy admired Washington nonetheless and wanted to become an important black intellectual like him.

W. E. B. DuBois

The famous black writer, Sandy became familiar with his work through reading Tempy's newspapers and publications. Tempy preferred DuBois to Washington, but Sandy liked both and thought of them both as role models.

Sister Johnson

One of Aunt Hager's good friends, and as advanced in years as she was. When Sandy returns to his old home, he enjoys listening to Sister Johnson talk about how everyone in town is doing.

Mrs. J. J. Rice

The white woman Annjee works for. Sandy despises how badly Mrs. Rice condescends to Annjee.



Objects/Places

Stanton, Kansas

The small Kansas town where *Not without Laughter* is set.

Chicago

The city where Jimboy and Annjee end up and where Sandy goes to live with Annjee when she has the money to send for him and Jimboy has gone to fight in World War I.

Aunt Hager's House

Sandy grows up in Aunt Hager's small home until Aunt Hager dies.

Tempy's House

Sandy lives in Tempy's much nicer home after Aunt Hager dies.

High and Low-Church Black Christianity

While Aunt Hager goes to the Baptist Church and engages in revival meetings, Tempy finds that form of Christian piety "" prefers to Episcopal Church because of its intelligent and sophisticated pastor and high-church services. Aunt Hager sees Tempy's change of church as forgetting the heart of Christianity for appearing high class.

Segregation

Numerous times in the book, Sandy, his friends and his family are excluded from city events due to segregation.

Crowville

The post-slavery black town where Sister Johnson lived. Black people accumulated quite a bit of wealth and the white people resented them so much that at the first provocation, they evicted the blacks and burned the town down.

The Bottoms

The "red-light district" of Stanton where Harriett works as a prostitute.



A Shelf of Books

The chapter title that references the shelves full of books in Tempy's house which Sandy started to devour when he comes down with the mumps.

Dark and Light-Skinned Blacks

An important feature of Not without Laughter is the importance of the varied skin tones of Stanton blacks. Most blacks wanted to be lighter skinned and to appear more like white people in order to get ahead in life.

Aunt Hager's Dreams

Aunt Hager believed that Sandy could be a great man and pushed him to be one.

Conforming to White Society

A wide range of actions in Not without Laughter are either attempts to conform to white expectations of blacks or to resist them.



Themes

The Injustice of White Treatment of Blacks in American Society

An obvious and striking theme of *Not without Laughter* is the deep injustice involved in how whites treated blacks in American society. In fact, Hughes aims to show that racism was deeply entrenched across the United States and not just in the South.

The racism of Stanton becomes quite clear on numerous occasions. Early in the book when Annjee is working for the thin, white blond woman, Mrs. J. J. Rice, Sandy becomes furious with how condescending Rice was to his mother and how hard she worked her. Jimboy also complained early on that his boss fired him because the union workers he employed refused to work with a black man. Sandy was regularly segregated in school and he and his friends were not allowed into a carnival because they were black. And because whites wouldn't let blacks into a number of recreational facilities, there were few places for them to freely congregate.

A constant theme throughout the book is how important skin color was in black society in Stanton. Lighter skinned blacks simply had a better chance of doing well in life. Hughes always describes the character of the skin color of the major characters in part to show how skin-tone is correlated with success in American society.

Later in the book, the forms of racism become more explicit and shocking. The reader learns that Sister Johnson's town of Crowville was burned down by jealous whites just because they were successful. When Aunt Hager dies, her obituary actually read that she was "respected by many white families in the community" while not even including the names of her children. Stanton was so racist that they regarded the fact that Hager was respected by many whites as a more important feature of her life than even the names of her children.

Philosophies of Enduring Oppression

Langston Hughes was something of a social philosopher and an important analyst of race relations. While living under a white-dominated society, blacks had to struggle to make good lives for themselves. They also had to decide how they were to live with the oppressive social circumstances they faced. Hughes presents three general strategies in the forms of Aunt Hager, Tempy and Harriett.

Aunt Hager represents the more traditional and Christian strategy of what might be called accommodation. Hager always argues that those who do you wrong must be loved and forgiven, that one must pray for one's enemies and learn to make the best of what one is given. After all, we will spend eternity in heaven with Jesus and so must tend to having the best souls we can and being the most loving people we can to



become more like Jesus. On the one hand, Sandy finds much to admire in this philosophy of selfless giving. On the other hand, Sandy worries that Aunt Hager was unable to appreciate the great opportunities for social change present in this life in part because she was actually a slave at one time.

Tempy represents what Hughes sees as the upper class black strategy of what might be called assimilation and imitation. Tempy has more or less repudiated the community she grew up in. She wishes black people wouldn't "sing so much" and claims that she doesn't "even like watermelon". She makes sure to speak the most precise, non-black English that she can and believes that by showing white people that black people can have "taste" that they might be treated better. She even changed churches because the services in her new church were "more refined". The reader also finds Tempy deliberately hiding her family background and working with whites during World War I in the hopes that by fighting and dying with whites blacks would receive better treatment.

Harriett represents what Hughes sees as the more radical strategy of individualist rebellion. Aunt Harriett rebels against Aunt Hager's demands early on by leaving for the Bottoms and becoming a prostitute, or leaving to work for a carnival later on. On the one hand, her leaving home was sad and her becoming a prostitute was a tragedy. But as Sandy notes, something about the "world of sin" made men more equal; racial equality only existed in "the Bottoms", Hughes notes. Harriett simply refuses to do anything but go her own way. Eventually, Harriett becomes a minor celebrity due to her excellent blues singing and is able to finance Sandy's education. She refuses to conform to or in any way accommodate the social expectations that whites or blacks had for her and Sandy ultimately decides to do the same.

Black Dreams in a White World

Not without Laughter is ultimately the story of the young and struggle of an intelligent and confused little boy, Sandy Rogers, to get ahead in life, become educated and find his way out of poverty to accomplish something great. However, there were many obstacles in Sandy's way, both economic and psychological.

First, Sandy was desperately poor. His father, Jimboy, couldn't hold down a job and was racially discriminated against in the jobs he held, which often led to him being fired. His mother, Annjee, had little education and basic costs of living made it very difficult for her to save money; she was also sick for a long period during the book. Aunt Hager worked extremely hard but had trouble putting away money as well. As a result, Sandy rarely had even a nice pair of clothes or books beyond what was absolutely required for school. While in Chicago, he had extreme difficulties making enough money as a bell-hop to return even to high school.

The worse of the two obstacles to Sandy's educational success was psychological. Many white schools wouldn't allow Sandy in, and he was typically segregated in the few schools he was allowed to take part in. Further, many blacks in Stanton had simply

adapted to life in a white dominated society by becoming uninterested in learning and settling for occupations determined by the expectations that whites set for them.

Tempy and Aunt Hager reflected these forms of accommodation in different ways. Tempy tried to act white and Aunt Hager simply refused to protest against the social oppression she lived under (although, as Sandy later realizes, since she was a slave she knew no other way). Sandy ultimately followed his Aunt Harriett in flouting white expectations and making his own way.



Style

Perspective

The author of *Not without Laughter* is the famous early twentieth century black novelist, playwright and editorialist Langston Hughes (1902-1967). Hughes was one of the most prominent members of the Harlem Renaissance. Both of Hughes parents were mixed-race and were well-to-do. He was raised in a number of small towns in the Midwest. Hughes family were some of the first to make major social achievements for blacks in the United States. His great-uncle was the first black US Congressman from Virginia. His maternal grandmother was among the first women to be admitted to Oberlin College. Her first husband died in the raid on Harper's Ferry. Langston's maternal grandfather was an active educator and fought for black voting rights in Kansas.

These familial details are important. Not only did Hughes grow up in the Midwest, but he had the privilege and education and background to expect a lot of himself and to push himself to succeed. The pressures of racism gave him no reason to think that he could not achieve great things. And due to his parents' separation, he grew up with his maternal grandmother, Mary Patterson Langston, in Lawrence, Kansas.

Quite obviously, and Langston said this later in life, the book's perspective is his perspective as Sandy Rogers. It is Hughes's attempt to bring out the features of racist white society in the United States through the eyes of an intelligent young boy whose talents very well might not have come to fruition. Thus, Hughes's writing seethes with the hatred of racism against whites and is powerfully aware of class distinctions among blacks, which were based largely on how well they conformed to white social norms and how light their skin tone was. He also writes with the perspective of one who believes that getting ahead is possible for a black man even in a society set against him.

Tone

The tone of *Not without Laughter* somewhat hews to the perspective of its main character, Sandy Rogers, despite the fact that the book is written in the third person. Sandy doesn't understand a number of the important social events and relationships that are going on around him. He doesn't understand why Aunt Hager hates Jimboy, he doesn't understand why Jimboy doesn't write, he doesn't really understand the Christian religion and he doesn't understand why white people are so incredibly mean to him and his family. He knows nothing about sex or why he feels much of the way he feels. Consequently, the tone, while expressive and effusive about the events surrounding Sandy's life, often possesses a sense of confusion.

The author's broader tone, however, gives away a subtler reflection on race relations in the United States of the book's place and time. Hughes illustrates the degrading effects of racism on Stanton blacks in many aspects of life, and while Sandy sometimes picks



up on the outrageous expressions of racism, Hughes illustrates the subtler forms indirectly. This gives the book a biting and angry sub-tone where racism and racist treatment of blacks is seen as a clear and ferocious injustice.

At its most positive, the tone of *Not without Laughter* is hopeful. Sandy, against all odds, is going to get his education and strive to become a great man. The expectations of whites will not stop him, his difficult family life won't get in his way, and neither will his poverty. Sandy wants to be a great man, and his aspirations are lauded by the author with joy and excitement.

Structure

Not without Laughter is an average-sized novel at 324p. It contains thirty short chapters. All proceed in chronological order from Sandy's young childhood through various phases of the years that lead to his teenage years. The chapters in this guide are grouped into threes but the connection between the chapters is fairly continuous. Thus the chapters all flow chronologically and tell an overarching story. That said, a number of chapters aim to make a particular point. A case in point is Chapter 7, "White Folks," where race relations are discussed at great length in a conversation. Another example is Chapter 16, "Nothing but Love," where the reader encounters Aunt Hager's thoroughly Christian conception of dealing with oppression.

Some chapters are composed almost exclusively of dialogue, giving the reader the impression of a present conversation full of the unique dialect of African-American communities in the Mid-West in the early 20th century. Others mostly describe events and Sandy's internal thoughts. Still others recount poems, passages from books, and songs along with whatever events they describe.

By and large, it is most accurate to say that while the book has a straightforward and uncomplicated chronological superstructure, Hughes deals with a number of specific issues along the way. For instance, the book is peppered with analyses of particular issues surrounding race relations between whites and blacks, but Hughes will focus on those issues in specific chapters.



Quotes

"All the neighborhood, white or colored, called his grandmother when something happened."

Chap. 1, p. 10

"I told her I didn't think much o' joinin' a church so far away from God that they didn't want nothin' but yaller niggers for members, an' so full o' forms an' fashions that a good Christian couldn't shout—but she went on an' joined."

Chap. 2, p. 24

"When niggers get up in the world, they act just like white folks—don't pay you no mind. And Tempy's that kind of nigger—she's up in the world now!"

Chap. 4, p. 45

"Your old Jesus is white, I guess, that's why! He's white and stiff and don't like niggers!"

Chap. 4, p. 45

"So spoiled with colored folks waiting on 'em all their days! Don't know what they'll do in heaven, 'cause I'm gonna sit down up there myself."

Chap. 6, p. 68

"White folks run the world, and the only thing colored folks are expected to do is work and grin and take off their hats as though it don't matter."

Chap. 7, p. 85

"She just put us in the back cause we're niggers."

Chap. 11, p. 135

"I reckon white folks does think right smart of me,' said Hager proudly. 'They always likes you when you tries to do right.'"

Chap. 12, p. 143

"Father Hill is so dignified, and the services are absolutely refined!"

Chap. 13, p. 165

"One by one you leaves me—Tempy, then Harriet, then you But Sandy's gonna stick by, ain't you son? He ain't gwine leave his grandma. ... And I's gwine to make a fine man out o' you, Sandy. I's gwine raise one chile right yet, if de Lawd lets me live—just one chile right!"

(Chap. 15, p. 182)

"I's been livin' a long time in yesterday, Sandy chile, an' I knows there ain't no room in de world fo' nothin' mo'n love."

Chap. 16, p. 194



"He wondered how people made themselves great."
Chap. 19, p. 226

"That night Hager died. The undertakers came at dawn with their wagon and carried the body away to embalm it. Sandy stood on the front porch looking at the morning star as the clatter of the horses' hoofs echoed in the street. A sleepy young white boy was driving the undertaker's wagon, and the horse that pulled it was white."
Chap. 22, pp. 244-44

"Hager Williams, aged colored laundress of 419 Cypress Street, passed away at her home last night. She was known and respected by many white families in the community. Three daughters and a grandson survive."
Chap. 22, p. 246

"I want white people to know that Negroes have a little taste; that's why I always trade at good shops. ... And if you're going to live with me, you'll have to learn to do things right, too."
Chap. 23, p. 252

"White folks will see that the Negro can be trusted in war as well as peace. Times will be better after this for all of us."
Chap. 26, p. 274)

"Being colored is like being born in the basement of life, with the door to the light locked and barred—and the white folks live upstairs. They don't want us up there with them, even when we're respectable like Dr. Mitchell, or smart like Dr. DuBois.... Maybe it's best not to care, and stay poor and meek waiting for heaven like Aunt Hager did But I don't want heaven! I want to live first! ... I want to live!"
Chap. 26, p. 280

"I wants you to be a great man.' 'I won't disappoint you, Aunt Hager. I won't disappoint you now."
Chap. 29, p. 314

"He's gotta be what his grandma Hager wanted him to be—able to help the whole black race, Annjee! You hear me? Help the whole race!"
Chap. 30, p. 323



Topics for Discussion

What philosophy of oppression does Aunt Hager represent? How does Aunt Hager's deep commitment to the Christian religion affect her approach to racism and her willingness to hope for Sandy's future?

What philosophy of oppression does Aunt Harriett represent? What does Sandy admire about her?

What philosophy of oppression does Aunt Tempy represent? What does Sandy admire and/or dislike about her?

Pick three of the most blatant instances of racism in *Not Without Laughter* and contrast how the characters handle them.

How does Sandy mix his refusal to be ashamed of his "low-class negro" past with his love for education? Is there any tension here?

Racism is not always explicit but sometimes is strongly expressed without anyone taking note. Name three examples of strong but deeply implicit and unnoticed racism in Stanton.

What is the social significance of Hughes choosing to mention the differing skin tones of blacks in Stanton?