Slave on the Block Study Guide

Slave on the Block by Langston Hughes

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"Slave on the Block," by Langston Hughes, is the story of a well-meaning but patronizing white couple's interactions with their young black employee. With cutting irony, Hughes dramatizes the tension that arises when the couple takes the young black man into their home in order use him as a source of artistic inspiration. Hughes presents the psychological dynamics between black and white characters in order to criticize the limitations of a racially divided society and to illustrate the subtle as well as overt forms racism can take.

"Slave on the Block,"was first published in *Scribner's* magazine in September, 1933, when Hughes was 31. It also appeared in a collection of short stories entitled *The Ways of White Folks,* which came out the following year. Hughes had already established his reputation as a major voice of the literary movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, but *The Ways of White Folks* was his first collection of short stories. Best known as a blues poet, Hughes devoted the main part of his career to writing about the experiences and expressions of ordinary, urban black people. *The Ways of White Folks* marks a temporary departure from this topic, focusing instead on the strange and contradictory racial attitudes of white people as seen from a black point of view.

Though *The Ways of White Folks* received favorable reviews when it came out, praised for its assured ironic voice and incisive understanding of human psychology, some critics found Hughes's portrayal of white characters unfair. Since then, scholars have responded that Hughes's critical portrayal of whites is a mark of maturity and an important step in the development of African-American literature.

Author Biography

Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902. His parents divorced, and he grew up with his mother and grandmother, moving frequently around the South and Midwest. Hughes first went to New York at age nineteen in order to attend Columbia University. He soon dropped out of college, but stayed in New York where he met the group of writers and intellectuals with whom he was to socialize and collaborate over the next decade. Together they forged the literary movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. When Hughes published his first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues,* in 1926, he was immediately recognized as a significant literary talent. That year he enrolled at Lincoln University, sponsored by a wealthy white patron, Mrs. Osgood Mason, a woman to whom Hughes referred as "godmother." With her pressure and encouragement, Hughes continued to write as he earned his degree. But in 1930 he broke off his emotional and financial relationship with Mrs. Mason and with several of his Harlem Renaissance peers.

Hans Ostrom writes, " *The Ways of White Folks* closes an early phase of Hughes's life and literary career and opens a new, more sober one." It was Hughes's first book after breaking with his patron, and it displays his growing radical political consciousness. While traveling in the Soviet Union in 1932, Hughes read British modernist D. H. Lawrence's "The Lovely Lady." Its main character reminded him of Mrs. Mason, and its direct style of psychological and social criticism inspired him to write short stories.

Over the next decades Hughes became more involved in leftist politics, both through his participation in the radical Black Aesthetic movement and through his political activism. Most of his fiction and poetry shows a desire to represent the experiences of working-class, urban African Americans. Hughes was a cosmopolitan man who was acquainted with many of the most important artists and thinkers of the twentieth century. He was, at once, an observer and a champion of the common person, a man who devoted his career to making great art out of humble folk forms.

In his preface to *Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives Past and Present,* Henry Louis Gates, Jr., describes Hughes as a man who was as lonely as he was gregarious. Hughes never married or had children. Although he is thought to have been homosexual, some friends described him as asexual. "Hughes knew *everybody,*" Gates writes, "but almost no one knew him, or was able to penetrate the veils and masks the truly vulnerable fabricate to present public personae to the world." Hughes lived in Europe most of his adult life, but frequently visited New York. He died there in 1967 from complications following surgery.

Plot Summary

The story opens with a description of Michael and Anne Carraway, a well-to-do white couple living in Greenwich Village who "went in for Negroes." "The Village" is considered liberal and bohemian, and the Carraways think of themselves as liberal and bohemian as well as artistic: Michael composes piano music and Anne paints. They "adore" and collect African-American art and music and attempt to cultivate friendships with blacks— whom they consider "a race too charming and naive and lovely for words." The Carraways are unable to sustain ongoing interracial relationships, although they do have a live-in black cook and maid, "dear Emma."

After Emma "took sick and died in her room in their basement," the Carraways hire a new black maid, Mattie, and then meet Emma's nephew, Luther, "the most marvellous ebony boy." Anne longs to paint him, so they hire him to maintain the "garden," a tiny space behind the house. Mattie introduces Luther to Harlem nightlife, keeping him out late so that he falls asleep as Anne paints him. Staring at the sleeping youth, she decides that she should paint him half nude, posed as a slave on an auction block. Michael uses Luther's slave pose as an inspiration for a piece of music he calls "a modern slave plaint."

Luther becomes a familiar part of the household. The Carraways display him to friends and have him sing "southern worksongs and reels . . . spirituals and ballads." Eventually the Carraways find both Luther and Mattie "a bit difficult to handle." Luther does less and less work, helps himself to their cigarettes and wine, and joins their guests uninvited. The Carraways find Luther and Mattie in bed together. They cannot allow themselves to disapprove because of their vaunted liberality and open-mindedness—which they are convinced stems from their artistic genius. However, when they hear Mattie and Luther argue, they feel that the angry atmosphere inhibits their creativity. Anne wants to finish her "Boy on the Block" slave painting, but Michael hints that he is "a little bored with the same Negro always in the way."

Michael's imperious mother, Mrs. Carraway, comes for a visit. Luther is deliberately over-familiar with her, and during an angry exchange between them she screams "a short loud, dignified scream" of outrage at his "impudence." She demands that Michael fire Luther; although Anne protests that she has not finished her slave painting, Michael sides with his mother. Luther seems more amused than distressed about his abrupt dismissal. Mattie joins him, saying that she and Luther have "stood enough" from the Carraways. Michael and Anne have no idea what she is talking about. As they leave, Anne moans in distress at the loss of her 'Boy on the Block'."

Summary

In the first paragraph of *Slave on the Block* the reader is introduced to Michael and Anne Carraway and told of their fondness for Negroes. Their affection does not channel itself into avenues of social service, welfare or philanthropy because the Carraways like Negroes just as they are: charming, innocent and childlike. That is how the Carraways perceive them. The obvious irony in the narrator's tone sets an early theme that the Carraways' naive and one-dimensional perceptions of Negroes are strong forces in the plot.

Michael and Anne especially love the artistic expressions of Negroes in dance, song, poetry, plays and writing. They collect Negro art and artifacts, long to make the acquaintance of prominent Negro leaders of the day, and frequent all the most popular nightclubs and dance halls in Harlem. They, themselves, live a very comfortable and well-to-do life in New York's Village. The Carraways fancy themselves to be liberal, bohemian artists. Anne is a painter and Michael is a pianist and composer.

Although they surround themselves with as much "darky" culture, objects, and objectified Negro people as possible, and as much as they love Negroes, Negroes don't seem to love Michael and Anne. The narrator offers several reasons why this might be the case. Perhaps they gush too much, or too soon, and dark people suspect them of something fraudulent. Perhaps they are mistaken for poor white folks and shunned. Maybe their Village house is too far from Harlem and too hard to find. If they do manage to lure a dark friend into their home and their social circles, a return visit is never paid.

There was one colored person who was a constant presence in their life until she died in their basement. Emma was their cook and maid. Her illness and subsequent death lead to the arrival of an ebony black boy, Emma's nephew, Luther, who has come from New Jersey to gather her things and take them back to his mother, Emma's sister. Luther left the South to join family in Jersey, where he landed a shoe shining job for a Greek. He tells Michael and Anne that he had to share half of his tips with his boss. This surprised and irritated him, so he quit. He has remained unemployed for four months. Luther is looking for work and makes this known immediately upon seeing the Carraways.

They find his brash assertiveness charming and naive. Immediately upon seeing Luther, the Carraways are already thinking of ways to put him to work in their collaborative artistic endeavors. They envision a joint exhibit of Anne's paintings set to Michael's music and are certain that the public will have no choice but to love it. They are both very taken with their own, and each other's, artistic gifts. Many of the themes will be black; and because Anne had painted Emma six times, her delight is palpable with this dark vision of fresh material standing in front of her. "He is the jungle," Anne exclaims; and Michael is euphoric himself, free-associating Negro spirituals to pair with the boy's presence.

Anne decides immediately that she must paint this "utterly Negro" model and asks him to return the next day. Luther is agreeable and the first token job he is given is tending to the tiny excuse for a garden, a little patch behind the house no bigger than Michael's piano. Nothing ever grows there. However they sometimes set a table for four outside anyway, as if something did. Luther claims that he can plant things, thus giving the Carraways a seemingly legitimate reason to hire him. Luther spends his first day digging around and puttering with seeds and enjoying several meals that Mattie, their new colored cook and maid, serves him. The Carraways believe that Luther will provide good company for Mattie, who claims to be afraid to stay in the house alone. She uses that as a cover story for her true fondness for the Harlem nightclubs and speakeasies. Mattie has a wild side hiding underneath her acquiescent servant's veneer; and this is the first foreshadowing glimpse the reader is allowed into her depths and complexities.

Luther is given a place to sleep in the basement by the furnace, and Anne begins to paint him on the second day. On the second night, Mattie introduces Luther to her favorite hot spots in Harlem. Luther has never set foot in Harlem, living so far away and being a relatively quiet boy. Still, Mattie has no trouble coaxing out his more rebellious and exuberant nature to consort with hers. The active nightlife these two create for themselves independent of, and mostly unknown to, the Carraways leaves Luther very tired in the day when Anne is trying to paint him. He begins to sleep while she paints and Anne, as usual, attributes his actions to the idealized, childlike image she considers to be natural Negro ways. Anne titles her painting, "The Sleeping Negro," alerting the reader there is going to be more to this quiet, sleeping, docile man child than meets the Carraway blind eye.

One day, while staring at Luther admiringly as he sleeps, it occurs to Anne that she should paint him nude, or half nude. This inspires her to create a slave painting of Luther, using the market at New Orleans as the setting. "The Boy on the Block" is her new working title. She conveys her artistic vision to Luther and expresses her desire to capture the sorrow and soul of a black slave about to be sold in oil on canvas. Would he please remove his shirt for her? Luther complies, rewarding Anne with a slightly embarrassed smile. Luther mounts a box that represents the slave block and strikes his pose for Anne. When Michael enters the room to find the half-clothed Negro boy on the box/block, he is seized with artistic inspiration of his own and immediately rushes to his piano to pour out what he considers to be a contemporary slave composition. The Carraways swoon under the spell of their mutual muse. They paint and play until dark, only stopping to give their model on the block a rest break.

Later that evening, after dinner, the Carraways go out to a new black stage show. Luther and Mattie sigh with relief and dress for a night out in Harlem. They are glad to be free of the Caraways and share their obvious antipathy for them with each other. Mattie finds them strange. Although they pay her well, they make her nervous with their eccentricities and their odd desire to see their Negro help pose for paintings and sing on command. Mattie likes to do her job, collect her pay, and live out her own life of creative expression in the dark clubs of Harlem. Even though Luther willingly sings on command for the Caraways, the little square of land they call the garden has gone neglected; and

all of his time in their employ is now spent posing and singing. He is tired, bored, and restless.

As time passes, Luther and Mattie grow increasingly hard for Michael and Anne to control. They blame Mattie for corrupting a sweet, young man with her lustful, older womanly ways, clearly evidenced by the fact that they are now sharing her bed. This was discovered very late one night when the Carraways went looking for Luther, intending to wake him up so that he could entertain a guest with a song. Luther was not to be found in his own bed by the furnace, but beside Mattie, in hers. The ever-placating Anne condones the lovemaking as the most natural thing for Negroes to do together, even though she cannot deny that there have been slightly perceptible changes in Luther's attitude and manner since his arrival.

In her attempt to rationalize away the discomfort she will not allow herself to feel, Anne admits that she, too, has benefited from Luther's association with Mattie. His dance skills are now very sharp and he is teaching Anne the Lindy Hop. Even more important, her "Boy on the Block" is far from finished; and he does keep the house warm and the furnace tended. After weighing the pros and cons, Anne decides to keep Luther, although Michael is growing bored with the same old Negro around the house and garden. This is a wonderful glimpse of the Carraways' need for surface level novelty in their Negroes.

Luther has begun to feel a bit too comfortable in Michael's home for Michael's comfort, helping himself to their wine, their cigarettes and even the company of the Carraways' friends. He's taken on a familiarity that disquiets Michael, although he his wife can only allow themselves explore this concern in tiny, measured doses. Any such negative feeling conflicts at the deepest levels with the Carraways' self-perception of progressive, liberal, open-minded, bohemian artists. While they are admittedly concerned about Luther and Mattie, sensing a deeper and darker problem that lurks in the basement, they continue to ease their suppressed concerns by infantilizing the "delightful simplicity of the Negroes."

Although Mattie has begun to dress Luther very well, fights between them have become so disturbing to the Carraways' peace of mind that neither can focus on their art. The thick tension between the foursome is finally coming to a boiling point, as evidenced by the inability of both Michael and Anne to create - the thing they seem to do with absolute ease.

All this denied, unspoken and suppressed emotion erupts on the day that Anne asks Luther to come upstairs, take off his shirt, mount his box, and pose for her painting. Luther shuffles upstairs, humming a slave dirge. In a second act of clear intent, replete with symbolism, he lets the furnace nearly extinguish itself. The narrator's true point of view is no longer masked by irony and sarcasm,

A fifth character is introduced, bringing some much-needed movement to the stalemate between the foursome in the Village household. Michael's mother arrives from Kansas City. She is clearly outspoken, blunt, and not well-liked by her daughter-in-law. She also

is not particularly liked by the Negro help, who she calls "servants." While her presence inspires greater efforts and respect from Mattie, Luther's behavior runs in the opposite direction. He sings impudent songs that he knows she disdains, expressly against her wishes. One day, before he expects to pose for Anne, he passes by Mrs. Carraway in his shirtless state, arms full of red roses, and asks her how long she intends to stay. She takes umbrage at his question, and he counters her sharp rebuke with one of his own. The fur flies and Michael and Anne appear, trying to manage the scene and calm tempers. Michael is forced to choose between placating his mother by dismissing Luther from his employ, or appeasing his wife by keeping him at least until her "Slave on the Block" is complete.

Luther offers to go and Mattie chimes in from the doorway, signaling her intent to follow him out the door. Mattie makes it very clear that she and Luther have tolerated quite enough of the "white folk foolery." Anne is distressed and obviously confused. What ever could she mean? What have they tolerated? The Carraways have been only kind and generous in every way to both Luther and Mattie. What has happened here in a seemingly parallel universe that they have been unaware of? Anne believes that the whole problem stems from the night they came looking for Luther while he slept with Mattie, hoping he'd favor their visitor with a song. Michael leaves to pay Mattie their final wages while Luther hands Anne the armful of red roses, shooting Mrs. Carraway a wry and impudent smile. The shock of white teeth against his ebony face remind Anne of her first glance of him and as he turns his bare back on her and walks away from her down the hall, Anne is left wistful, mournful and grieving for "my ' Boy on the Block'!"

Analysis

From the very first paragraph of *Slave on the Block*, the reader is acutely aware that, under the narrator's artificially light, tongue-in-cheek ribbing of the Carraways, lies a far more angry tone of disdainful mockery and repudiation for all that they are and pretend to be.

The author immediately starts to weave one of the strongest threads that undercut all actions within the story. The incongruity of what Michael and Anne claim to love most about blacks, is also what they try hardest to deny and repress in themselves. While they appear to delight in the dark, dank, primal jungle passions, these unbridled sexually creative and artistic energies are also what they fear most. Thus their fascination with black culture actually borders on obsession. The collecting of artifacts, the attending of black plays and lectures, and even their "collecting" famous black friends are all attempts to imbue their own lives with these very primal energies. It is as if by sheer osmosis and proximity that these dark, passionate forces could rub off on them. At the same time, by objectifying and infantilizing Negroes, treating them at times like small house pets, Michael and Anne maintain the distance they need to feel safe around the powerful forces they crave, yet fear.

The hunger and intensity in their overbearing efforts are the very things that prevent them from having any true Negro friends. One taste of their unsettling fanaticism surely

sends a sensitive person running in the opposite direction. They are over-the-top in their affections; and this rings as false to the discerning Negroes who cross their path. The placating manner with blacks is also offensive, demeaning and undoubtedly the real reason why no enduring relationships are formed. Mattie said of Michael and Anne: "They make me nervous." Mattie breaks out of the stifling prison of pretense every chance she gets. She finds her life energy and creative expression in the clubs of Harlem.

The contradiction is striking between the Carraways' strong need to perceive themselves as free-spirited and open-minded liberals, and their constant attempts to belittle the black people they do share their lives with. Luther quickly grows restless and bored, posing for Anne and singing his command performances. The Carraways even attempt to wake him in the middle of the night to drag him out as like a clever parrot to amuse a guest. When the novelty eventually wears off, even Michael is bored with "the same Negro always in the way." Cloaked in Michael's boredom is fear. He and Anne both sense the stronger forces brewing just beneath the surface, as Luther and Mattie become close and a sexual relationship develops.

In keeping with the arid and sterile portrayal of the Carraways, not once does the author mention any semblance of sexual passion or physical intimacy between Anne and Michael. It is all relative. They have sex when they collaborate artistically. In fact, the closest the reader comes to perceiving any sexual tension between Michael and Anne is in the scene where they first put Luther up on the box and both "simultaneously release" themselves into their respective art forms. This scene foreshadows more sexual tension to erupt further into the story.

Michael and Anne blame Mattie, the much older woman perceived as a conniving seductress. Yet how much of Anne's reaction is jealousy, as she herself stares longingly at her ebony boy who is half-dressed for days on end? The conflict deepens in Anne over the sexual relationship between Mattie and Luther; and while "the last thing they would do would be to interfere with the delightful simplicity of Negroes," it is not that simple. Audible fights come from the basement, along with glowering dark faces and deep, disturbing moods. The air was so thick with charged sexual tension and the complexities of human emotion in the Carraway house, that both Anne and Michael stopped creating. They were rendered impotent in the face of the brooding jungle energies simmering just beneath them, threatening to overwhelm and annihilate them in both the literal and figurative sense.

In what is probably the most beautifully depicted scene of symbol come to life, Luther begrudgingly drags himself up the stairs to pose for Anne while shuffling his feet and singing a slave song. The symbolism seems to escape Anne. As a point of emphasis, Luther lets the furnace die out that day. While it takes the blunt, in-your-face, offensiveness of Michael's mother to contrast Anne's obliviousness, at least the older Mrs. Carraway is honest about where she believes a Negro's place to be. She is clear and candid about the boundaries she expects to be observed between the races and the classes, while Anne continues to find nothing at all ironic or incongruent in her ongoing dedication to capturing her "Boy on the Block." Anne and Michael also find

nothing odd about setting a dinner table for four in an empty patch of dirt and calling it a garden veranda. Even though Luther agrees that "They is mighty funny". Through his delightfully wry and sardonic wit, with utter elegance Langston Hughes makes his point about race relations during this period. There is no need to beat the reader over the head with a club with heavy themes, when he can employ such delicious literary techniques to do it with the touch of a feather.

Characters

Anne Carraway

Anne Carraway lives with her husband Michael in Greenwich Village. They are wealthy white patrons of black art and culture. The two of them consider themselves liberal, open-minded, artistic geniuses. Anne is a painter, and her enthusiasm for "things Negro" extends to using her black servants as models for her paintings.

When Luther appears, he appeals to her on what she describes as a visual level: "He *is* the jungle," she says. Her first picture of Luther is called "The Sleeping Negro." It reflects her vision of blacks as "dear, natural, childlike people." She decides to paint another picture of him, "nude, or at least half nude." Anne admires Luther's physical beauty, but her way of looking at him is possessive and objectifying. She is, like her husband, portrayed as a caricature of the condescending, unwittingly offensive white thrillseeker dabbling in what she considers a "primitive" culture.

Michael Carraway

Michael Carraway lives with his wife Anne in Greenwich Village. They are wealthy white patrons of black art and culture. The two of them consider themselves liberal, open-minded, artistic geniuses. Michael is a composer for piano, and he draws from black musical traditions for inspiration. The single one of his compositions described in the story sounds unpleasant and cacaphonous. Like Anne, he is portrayed as a charicature of the condescending, unwittingly offensive white thrillseeker dabbling in black culture. There are also overtones of sexual jealousy in his reaction to his wife's enthusiastic appreciation of Luther's physicality. When his visiting mother has an angry confrontation with Luther, Michael takes his mother's side and fires Luther. He had grown "a little bored with the same Negro always in the way."

Mrs. Carraway

Mrs. Carraway, Michael's mother, comes from Kansas City to visit the couple in New York. She has a rigid sense of racial and class divisions, saying "I never play with servants," an implicit criticism of Anne and Michael's interactions with Luther. When she reprimands Luther for being too familiar, he calls her "poor white" and she calls him a "nigger servant." She insists that Michael choose between Luther's presence in the house and her own, leading to Luther's dismissal.

Emma

Emma is Luther's aunt, who is deceased at the time the story takes place. Emma had been the Carraways' cook and Anne had painted a number of portraits of her. They meet Luther when he comes to pick up her belongings.

Luther

Luther is a young black man who, when the story begins, has recently moved from the South to live with relatives in New Jersey. The action of the story begins with his introduction to the Carraway household and ends with his departure. The story circles around various characters' response to Luther's presence. The liberal Carraways stereotype and objectify Luther as the essense of blackness and the jungle, and assign him nominal work in the household while Anne paints pictures of him and Michael is inspired to compose a "modern slave plaint." They display him to guests and have him sing spirituals and work songs. Their cook and maid, Mattie, introduces him to Harlem nightlife, begins a sexual relationship with him, and spends money on clothing for him. Mattie and Luther agree that they are treated and paid well, but that the Carraways are "funny" and make them uncomfortable. There is a suggestion in the text that Luther exploits the Carraways' narrow ideas about blacks as simple, childlike people by living up to all their preconceived notions: shirking his work and indulging himself sensually.

Mattie

Mattie is Anne and Michael Carraway's black maid. She is living at their house when Luther arrives. She is suspicious of the Carraways' fascination with blacks and, unlike Luther, keeps her distance from them. She sees it as her job to cook for them, not to pose for pictures or to inspire them. Mattie likes to get out of the Carraways' house in the evenings and to stay out late in the clubs of Harlem. She introduces Luther to Harlem nightlife and enters into a sexual relationship with him. The Carraways suspect that she is in love with Luther because she buys him gifts and gives him money. When Luther is fired, Mattie tells the Carraways that she and he have both both "stood enough foolery from you white folks" and leaves her job as well.

Themes

Freedom and Slavery

The very title "Slave on the Block" calls immediate attention to the theme of freedom and slavery. Just as slaves were displayed to prospective buyers, the Carraways put Luther on display in their household. Anne's great inspiration is to paint Luther as a slave, and Michael is moved to compose"a modern slave plaint" when he sees the young man posing. One day, when called to pose, he reluctantly appears, singing "Before I'd be a slave / I'd be buried in ma grave / And go home to my Jesus / And be free." That same afternoon he almost lets the furnace go out. Slaves often sang spirituals about freedom as a masked form of rebellion. This song can be seen as Luther's criticism of his status in the Carraway household.

Race and Racism

For all their enthusiasm for "things Negro," the Carraways do not acknowledge Luther, or indeed any black person, as an individual. In fact, they hold firmly to grotesquely racist opinions about blacks as a simple, childlike race, "charming and naive and lovely," who should be left "unspoiled" and simply enjoyed. Unfortunately for the Carraways, the individual blacks whom they meet persist in being individual people with their own ideas of how they would prefer to live. It is clear throughout the story— and particularly at its end— that the Carraways will never overcome their own lack of comprehension. Luther shuns the nominal "work" he has been hired to perform, begins a sexual affair with Mattie, takes things from the household, and avoids posing for Anne for days at a time, perhaps exploiting the Carraways stereotypes to his own advantage. The story implies that it is not despite but *because* of their fascination with certain stereotyped concepts of blackness that the Carraways are racist.

Class Conflict

Issues of economic class form an underlying theme of the story. Despite the fact that the Carraways think of their interest in black culture as part of a radical artistic project, their only actual relationships with black people are the essentially economic ones they have with their servants. The third-person narrator of the story reports that the occasional "furtive Negro" or "lesser Harlem celebrity or two" who attends one of their "rather slow parties. . . seldom came back for more," perhaps because the Carraways live in an exclusive, well-to-do and hard-to-find little enclave in the city.

Sex and Sexuality

The narrative avoids any overt discussion of the Carraways' sexuality. However, Anne Carraway's response to Luther carries erotic overtones. She admires his physical

appearance, stares at him while he is sleeping, and decides she wants to paint him nude— quickly emended to "or at least half nude." When she finds out that Luther and Mattie are having sex, she contends that it is "simple and natural for Negroes to make love." The narrative makes plain, however, that the Carraways give a great deal of thought to Luther's sexuality: Anne in particular blaming the older Mattie for "spoiling a nice simple young boy." She notes that Luther is wearing increasingly nice clothing bought by Mattie and going out with her nightly. At no point does the narrator comment on these intrusions into Luther and Mattie's privacy; they are simply noted.

While Michael Carraway initially shares his wife's enthusiasm for Luther's inspiring presence, when Luther becomes more "familiar," Michael's enthusiasm wanes. Anne wants to keep Luther on so she finish her painting, and because he is teaching her the dances he has learned at the Harlem nightclubs that he frequents with Mattie. When Luther antagonizes Michael's visiting mother, he is again shirtless because he expects to pose for Anne; Anne is described as moaning "Oh!" repeatedly — no less than four times— and gazing at his shirtless body as Luther leaves for good.

Style

Point of View and Irony

Hughes tells the story of Luther's interactions with the Carraways by using a third-person narrator, meaning that the events in "Slave on the Block" are described from the position of an outside observer. This third-person narrator is omniscient, having access to the characters' private thoughts. For example, the narrator is in a position to report, "They didn't understand the vagaries of white folks, neither Luther nor Mattie, and they didn't want to be bothered trying." Most often however, third-person narration assumes an objective presentation of facts and events. For example, the narrator does not comment on the fact that the Carraways considered Luther "so charming and naive to ask right away for what he wanted" when he comes to them looking for work, but instead presents the information in a straightforward and neutral manner. However, Hughes does not intend for this information to evoke a neutral response, for he has already established that the Carraways believe that all blacks are charming and naive, and thus this information is an indictment of their use of stereotype. When there is an imbalance between what is presented and what is felt, the effect created is one of irony. Throughout the story, Hughes's narration is highly ironic. He criticizes the Carraways' attitudes and beliefs about race through describing their narrow ideas about black people in a distant and objective manner, offering a bitter and precise portrait of their particular brand of racism. The story's ironic narration is perhaps its most striking stylistic feature. Hughes's use of irony suggests the influence of both modernist writing and traditional African and African-American storytelling.

Setting

When Hughes sets out to define "the ways of white folks" he carefully delineates the social milieu he is addressing and the attitudes specific to a particular time and place. The story opens with a description of the type of white folks the Carraways are. They are part of a New York intellectual and artistic clique that embraces black culture, lives in an exclusive and expensive area of Greenwich Village, and frequents the upscale clubs and bars of Harlem that cater specifically to white sensation-seekers.

Although the larger context of a modern, segregated New York City is carefully defined, all of the action in the story takes place within the Carraways' household. Their home is the only scene of contact between the Carraways and their domestic servants. Although both enjoy Harlem nightlife, it is noted that the Carraways favor "the ritzy joints where Negroes couldn't go themselves" other than to work and perform. The action of the story is initiated when Luther arrives at their door and the story ends when he leaves. The plot builds from the tense series of actions and reactions between the Carraways and Luther within the domestic setting.

Symbolism

Hughes carefully weaves symbolism into the texture of a realistically represented social setting. For example, Anne's portrait of Luther as a slave on the block fits in with Anne's role as an artist in the social context of Greenwich Village. However, the symbolic significance of the painting is profound. Through the symbol of the painting, Hughes suggests that the Luther's relationship to the Carraways echoes slavery, despite the fact that the Carraways think of themselves as liberals and free-thinkers who "love Negroes." Anne poses Luther on a box in the same way that a slave trader would place a slave on the block, displaying him for sale. Anne's social status gives her the power to represent him as a slave, and thus contributes to the production of the kind of stereotypes that oppress Luther in her household.

The roses that Luther carries into the library on the day he has the confrontation with Mrs. Carraway also have symbolic meaning. The roses add to the visual impact of the scene. Shirtless, Luther is a decorative object in the household, not unlike the roses. Luther's sensual appearance is part of what disturbs Mrs. Carraway and part of what pleases Anne. When Luther is fired, he tells Anne to arrange the flowers in the vases. To Luther, the roses represent work. He hands the roses to Anne in what can be seen as the inversion of a romantic gesture. Thus the roses symbolizes Anne's misguided, romanticized vision of Luther.

Satire

In literature, satire is the art of using ridicule, humor, and wit to criticize human nature and institutions. The white liberal couple the Carraways are clearly satirized in "Slave on the Block". They represent a type of patronizing, unconsciously offensive white patron of black arts in the 1920s and 30s. Although such individuals certainly did exist, the Carraways are portrayed nearly as caricatures, with their unpleasant characteristics exaggerated to underscore the themes of the story. The black characters similarly convey little depth: the reader learns little of their inner lives or private thoughts, although they are not as harshly presented as are the Carraways.

Historical Context

The Great Migration

The early twentieth century was a period of increasing urbanization in America. In 1920 the census showed that for the first time in U.S. history the majority of Americans lived in cities. However, while white Americans had been gradually moving into urban areas over the course of a century, black Americans became city-dwellers much more suddenly. Vast numbers of African Americans moved to northern cities between the 1910s and 1940s in a population shift known as the Great Migration (or the Great Black Migration).

In 1910 about 90 percent of the African American population of the United States lived in the South, with 78 percent living in rural areas. Economic factors such as crop failures in the South, the labor vacuum created by World War I, and the stemming of European immigrants after 1914, plus political factors such as segregation, discrimination, and lynching in the South, led to a huge influx of blacks into northern cities. Between 1910 and 1930, the black population in New York City tripled.

The Harlem Renaissance

Hughes is one of the authors most closely associated with the literary and cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. Like many African Americans of his generation, Hughes was born in the South and found his way to Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City. A group of white artistic and financial mentors interested in African-American culture whom Hughes met in New York shaped his impression of "the ways of white folks" as characterized in the story.

The Harlem Renaissance began around 1917, with the huge increase of blacks living in New York. About two-thirds of all black New Yorkers resided in Harlem. A thriving community and cultural center for blacks, Harlem was referred to as "the Negro capital of America." Concurrent with this population shift arose a new interest among white artists and intellectuals in black culture. New York's Greenwich Village was the center for a group of bohemian whites much like the Carraways, who were critical of mainstream society and tended to see African Americans as a primitive force of innocence and regeneration. Harlem became a popular entertainment spot for whites as well as blacks, famous for its clubs and cabarets. Bessie Smith and Paul Robeson, whose records the Carraways collect, are black singers who performed in Harlem. Countee Cullen, whose manuscript the Carraways own, is a black Harlem Renaissance poet. W. E. B. DuBois is a black leader, and Carl Van Vechten is a white Renaissance writer and patron of the arts. White artists fascinated with blacks and interested in writing about them dominated the early phase of the Harlem Renaissance.

Within a few years, starting around 1923, a small group of talented and well-educated African Americans living in Harlem became visible as they began to publish literature about their own experiences. Hughes was part of a group of writers who drew on black folk culture to create great art. These black artists saw artistic achievement as an important way for African Americans to overcome racism and win civil rights in the United States. They were promoted and financially supported by a group of wealthy and sympathetic whites. For several years, Hughes and a few of his peers were supported by an elderly white woman, Mrs. Osgood Mason, to whom they referred as their "godmother."

The Harlem Renaissance ended around 1935. In the last part of the Renaissance, young black artists became more rebellious and more critical of their white mentors, whom they accused of reducing them to stereotypes. By the time Hughes wrote "Slave on the Block," he had broken off his relationship with Mrs. Mason. Many of the Harlem Renaissance writers, including Hughes, had begun to question the earlier goal of assimilation and strove for a racially distinct style. Harlem Renaissance writing also became more explicitly political, sometimes influenced by Marxist theories of class division and economic exploitation. This position was shaped, in part, by the increasing economic divide between blacksf and whites as a result of the Great Depression. By 1935 several of the talented young writers of the Renaissance had died and many more had left Harlem.

The Great Depression

The Great Depression, initiated by the stock market crash of 1929, was a period of great economic hardship across the nation, but the troubled economy hurt African Americans disproportionately. Despite the artistic achievements and visibility of blacks in this period, they remained economically powerless. Harlem families, for example, paid twice as much of their income in rent as did white families in 1931, and by the end of 1932 almost half of Harlemites were unemployed. The median family income in Harlem dropped approximately 44 between 1930 and 1932. The Harlem artists were dependent on the support of white patrons, publishers, audiences and readers. As the economy foundered, financial support dried up and white interest in African-American art and culture also subsided.

Critical Overview

Hughes was surprised when his story "Slave on the Block" was accepted for publication in the distinguished and well-established magazine *Scribner's.* Other mainstream magazines hesitated to publish the stories he wrote in this period, particularly those referring to interracial sexual relationships. In 1934 Hughes collected the stories and published them a volume called *The Ways of White Folks,* his first book of short fiction. Its title is a reference to W. E. B. DuBois's influential 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk,* famous for its claim that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" — that is, the problem of the division between the black and white races. As a group, Hughes's stories address the new complications in interactions between the races in the early twentieth century, largely drawing from his own experiences with liberal whites, and in particular, with the white patron from whom he broke early in his career.

In *The Life of Langston Hughes,* biographer Arnold Rampersad describes the critical response to *The Ways of White Folks* as generally very favorable. He reports that at the time it was published, reviewers considered it not only his finest work to date, but some of the best writing to have appeared in the country in years. However, the book was not without its critics. Negative responses to the collection centered around Hughes's apparent anger and bitterness toward white people. Rampersad quotes one of the leading voices of the Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke, saying that "greater artistry, deeper sympathy, and less resentment would have made it a book for all times." Sherwood Anderson, a white writer who moved in Hughes's circle, wrote in a review for the *Nation,* "The Negro people in these stories of his are so alive, warm, and real, and the whites are all caricatures. . . . Mr. Hughes, my hat is off to you in relation to your own race but not to mine." According to Rampersad, prominent white liberal Martha Greuning had a similar criticism, reproaching Hughes for representing white people as "either sordid and cruel, or silly and sentimental."

In "The Practice of a Social Art," Maryemma Graham quotes Hughes in an interview given thirty years after the publication of *The Ways of White Folks.* Responding to criticisms of his representation of whites, Hughes explains his intentions: "Through at least one (maybe only one) white character in each story, I try to indicate that they are human, too. . . . What I try to indicate is that circumstances and conditions make it very hard for whites, in interracial relationships, each to his own self be true.'"

With the advantage of historical hindsight, recent scholars have been able to argue that the direct and angry portraits of race relations in *The Ways of White Folks* anticipated the cultural changes of the 1960s, including both the Civil Rights Movement and the development of the more radical style of Black Aesthetics. Rampersad says that *The Ways of White Folks* "set a new standard for excellence for black writers" and describes it as "a striking original, daring to say what had never been said so definitively before." Rampersad describes Hughes's writing in this collection, compared to his earlier work, as "far more adult and neurotic, more militant and defensive, and thus more modern and accurate as a description of the Afro-American temper as it was emerging." In his

Langston Hughes: A Study of the Short Fiction, Hans Ostrom writes that the lack of uniform critical praise for *The Ways of White Folks* is largely due to the fact that "it addresses questions of racial, class and sexual conflict so directly, uses fierce, even bitter, irony, and reflects Hughes's notions about short fiction, which were not altogether mainstream." Thus such criticism, Ostrom writes, "is in a sense only another measure of the book's distinctiveness."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Sarah Madsen Hardy holds a Ph.D. in English Language and Literature. In the following essay, she analyzes Hughes's choice to focus on white characters in "Slave on the Block."

One can see Langston Hughes's choice to write a collection of stories focusing on the "ways of white folks" as a curious one. For he was part of a vanguard of young black writers who set out to prove not only that African Americans had the talent to write literature, but that black people's experiences were as valid a subject for great art as those of whites. Earlier in his career, Hughes had transformed the black musical folk tradition of the blues into powerful poetry about the African American urban experience. Furthermore, for Hughes, representing African-American experiences had political implications as well as artistic ones. As an important voice in the literary movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes believed that the artistic representation of blacks' complex humanity could be an instrument for gaining civil rights and a weapon against racism. Last but not least, Hughes was well educated and could see that the great majority of American literature was written by white people and preoccupied with their experiences. Why should a black writer spend his time representing the attitudes and habits of whites?

Hughes's unflinching portrayal of race relations in "Slave on the Block," one of the stories in the collection, offers an avenue for exploring this question. Hughes is explicit about the fact that Luther and Mattie, two African-American domestic servants, would prefer not to think about their white employers, the Carraways, or their fascination with all things black. He writes, "They didn't understand the vagaries of white people, neither Luther nor Mattie, and they didn't want to be bothered trying." However, what Luther and Mattie want is not the only factor to consider. Hughes places the black characters in a position of economic dependence and close personal vicinity in which they have no choice but to deal with the Carraways' thoughts, feelings, and fantasies about their race. This is exacerbated in Luther's case, because the Carraways have hired him specifically to serve as a muse for their racially inspired artwork. By placing his characters in this context, Hughes suggests how continually African Americans must contend with white people's distorted images of them. Thus white attitudes become an intrinsic part of the black experience, an experience Hughes and his peers were committed to representing in all of its complexity. In Hughes's own personal experience, whites fascinated with the perceived vitality and simplicity of African-American art and artists were a formative part of his struggle to establish himself as an artist and a constant element of his social life in Harlem. In order to represent this reality, he needed to delve into the realm of white folks and their strange and contradictory ways.

The title that Hughes chose for the collection, *The Ways of White Folks,* reflects on its subject matter in a manner more subtle than may first be apparent. The title is not only a description of the stories' content, it is also an allusion to an influential collection of essays on black culture and spirit called *The Souls of Black Folk,* written by W. E. B. DuBois in 1903. DuBois was an important black intellectual, and his writing inspired

many artists and thinkers in the younger Harlem Renaissance generation of which Hughes was part. One of the most powerful concepts DuBois puts forth in *The Souls of Black Folk* is his description the psychological effect of racism on African Americans, an effect he calls "double consciousness." DuBois argues that American blacks constantly have to think of themselves in relation to the racial stereotypes that they regularly confront in various aspects of daily life. He contends that African Americans see things from their own unique cultural perspective, but that they are, at once, perpetually aware of the negative ways in which their race is *seen* in the wider mainstream culture. The consciousness of blacks is "double" because on the one hand, blacks internalize these derogatory images, incorporating them into their sense of identity, and on the other they struggle against them. In other words, the ways of white folks play a central if unwelcome role within the divided souls of black folk. Hughes's stories refer to DuBois's theory and reflect the condition he describes, dramatizing the pervasive influence of stereotype as it affects interracial perceptions and dynamics.

DuBois says that American blacks are "born with a veil." He suggests that while blacks can —and, indeed, must— understand and participate in the perspectives of the white dominant culture, whites can only see things from their own racial point of view. Whites create their own images of blackness and are blind to how different these images are from the reality of black life, which remains figuratively invisible to them behind its veil. "Slave on the Block" embroiders on this visual metaphor. Hughes's ironic narration— the gap between what he says and what he means— is built in order to reveal to his readers just how blind the Carraways are in their perceptions of Luther. When Luther first enters their house, the Carraways almost miss him: "They could hardly see the boy, it being dark in the hall, and he being dark, too." This failure to see has symbolic meaning. Because he is "dark," they focus on his racial appearance and the stereotypical associations it calls up for them. When they see Luther, all they see is that he looks "as black as all the Negroes they'd ever known put together." Hughes has already established the fact that the Carraways don't have African-American friends. Their idea of Luther is determined by the generalized image of blacks they have absorbed through popular and literary representations, images for the most part created in the white imagination.

Looking more closely at one particular stereotype, the figure of the "Uncle Tom," provides an additional context for understanding the significance of racial representation in "Slave on the Block." An "Uncle Tom" is a black man who is more loyal to whites than he is to his own people. He is happy to serve whites and to fulfill their wishes because he sees the role of the slave as befitting his simple, humble race. The term derives from *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* an anti-slavery novel Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote on the eve of the Civil War. Stowe, like the Carraways, certainly meant well when she created the character of Uncle Tom. Her book was meant to convince people that slavery was un-Christian. However, she accomplished this through relying on narrow ideas about racial differences. This story of a humble and simple slave, ever loyal to his white owners, formed one of the most enduring stereotypes for black men.

In "Slave on the Block" Hughes creates in Luther a black male character who does not conform to the image of a simple and contented servant who knows his place in the

tradition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* One can glean from Luther's impudent smile a repudiation of one of the most powerful stereotypes of black men. Also, and perhaps more importantly, the story illustrates how stereotypes distort the racial attitudes of well-meaning whites like the Carraways. The Carraways don't recognize that their admiration of Luther as "childlike" and "simple" can be traced back to the negative stereotype for the "Uncle Tom," and neither do they recognize how inaccurate these terms are for describing Luther, whom Hughes portrays as sardonic and rebellious.

The "Uncle Tom" is only one of the stereotypes in play in the story. Not only do the Carraways wish to see Luther as a childlike and naive "boy," they also wish to see him as "fervent" and sexual, a creature of the jungle— a stereotype with a different derivation. However, thinking about "Slave on the Block" as a response to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is particularly helpful in understanding Hughes's choice to write a collection of stories portraying the ways of whites. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the first novel published in the United States that had an African American as a main character. It was also the first best-seller in American history. The novel as well as its many stage adaptations were wildly popular for over fifty years, rendering the story familiar to the great majority of Americans. The success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* illustrates how thoroughly white representations of black people permeated American culture.

Like Stowe, the Carraways are artists interested in portraying blacks. "Slave on the Block"can be interpreted as a commentary on the power that white artists have to create and circulate images of black people— images that reflect a view of the race more closely related to other images created by whites than to black ways or souls. The story can at once be interpreted as an intervention, in which Hughes seizes some of this representational power in order to create an opposing set of images. Because Anne is a painter, she is in a position to create an image of Luther that places him in the position of a slave. By writing stories like "Slave on the Block," Hughes assumes control of how blacks and whites are represented, and creates and alternate image of freedom and slavery. In Hughes's story, Luther rebels against the Carraways, rejects their influence, and walks away free. The Carraways perpetuate their view of blacks as naive and simple through their artistic representations. In his story, Hughes shows how simple and limited the Carraways' views are. In many places in the story, the Carraways come across as naive, especially in regard to how they interact with Luther and Mattie. For example, near the conclusion of the story, when Mattie quits in solidarity with Luther, she tells the Carraways that they'd "stood enough foolery from you white folks!" Because the Carraways cannot see how their stereotypes are harmful, they fail to understand what Mattie means. "What could she mean, 'stood enough'? What had they done to them, Anne and Michael wondered. They had tried to be kind." It is not enough for Hughes to refute negative stereotypes of blacks. With fierce, unblinking portrayals of white ways, he also shows the havoc that stereotypes wreak on interracial interactions, compromising even whites with the best of intentions.

Describing the state of mind of blacks living in a culture in which representations like the "Uncle Tom" circulate freely, DuBois writes, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."

In writing "Slave on the Block," Hughes turns the tables, representing the Carraways with considerable contempt and pity. This ought not be understood as merely vengeful — a second wrong that can't make a right. DuBois shows how the peculiar sensation of seeing yourself as other sees you is a constitutive part of the black American experience, but not of the white one. In *The Ways of White Folks* Hughes offers white readers a rare opportunity to see themselves and to measure their souls from a point of view on the other side of the color line.

Source: Sarah Madsen Hardy, "White Ways and Black Souls," for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

Mowery has a doctorate in rhetoric/composition and literature from Southern Illinois University. He has taught there and Murray State University. In the following essay he examines the theme of unintended, or "benign" racism.

Overt racism— insults, threats, violence and discrimination— is not the only problem faced by African Americans. There is a more insidious kind that is more difficult to confront: unintended racism. In the short story "Slave on the Block," Langston Hughes addressed this type of bigotry. The characters in the tale are well-meaning people who are unaware of the effect their behavior has on people around them.

The Carraways are introduced as "people who went in for Negroes." But their attitude toward the blacks they meet is patronizing and condescending. In trying to express appreciation, they actually depreciate blacks with their insensitive remarks. When they first meet Luther, Anne says, "He is the jungle." Michael continues with "He's so utterly Negro." In both statements they fail to acknowledge Luther as a human being. When Michael accidentally finds Luther and Mattie in bed together, Anne's remark is again condescending. "It's so simple and natural for Negroes to make love." After Mattie and Luther begin spending time together, the Carraways worry that "she [is] spoiling a nice simple young boy." Their selfish concern is based on the belief that Mattie is "old enough to know better" than to interfere in the "delightful simplicity" of Luther.

These comments reduce Luther and Mattie to the level of children. Anne calls them "dear, natural childlike people." They treat Luther more as a house pet than as a servant with chores to do. He is asked to sing and dance for assembled guests. He is made to pose for Anne's paintings. He teaches Anne some of the dances he learns at clubs in Harlem. But he is never treated like a young adult.

The Carraways like to have parties to which "occasionally, a furtive Negro" or "sometimes a lesser Harlem celebrity" might come. Those who do attend seldom come back because the Carraways "tried too hard to make friends" and the blacks become suspicious of their motives. Symbolically, the Carraways are as far from a meaningful interaction with blacks as their secluded house is from Harlem.

Another aspect of the Carraways' naive indulgence of blacks can be found in their penchant for collecting art works by and about blacks. They are artists themselves, but "they never tried to influence that art, they only bought it and raved over it, and copied it." In their zeal to add to their collection of African-American art, they included the work of the Mexican artist Covarrubias, because "he caught the darky spirit!" Covarrubias is known primarily as an illustrator. Many of his works included caricatures of blacks that would be insulting and unacceptable in the 1990s. The couple reduces black artists and their work to a non-black representative, whose fame rested on unflattering caricatures of blacks. By fawning over these works, they expose their complete lack of sensitivity to what it means to be African American or an African-American artist.

They collect the recordings of Paul Robeson, a prominent black entertainer and singer whose creative life was spent in Europe because he was not accepted by American audiences, an indignity which does not concern the Carraways. They want to leave them "unspoiled and just enjoy them," as if such artists existed merely for their entertainment. "They knew Harlem like their own backyard," which was only "about as big as Michael's grand piano." They attended black clubs, for which they had to top the head man heavily, and "ritzy joints," where blacks could not get in. This is yet another example of how they reduce all things black to small collectible items.

The underlying theme here is a racism which seems to be benign on the surface. There is no confrontation or deliberate belittling of Negroes, no name calling, no threats of violence. Their effusive adulation of blacks is similar to the way the Kittridges treat Paul in the opening scenes of the movie *Six Degrees of Separation.*

This is quite different from the elder Mrs. Carraway's nasty attitude seen at the end of the story. She snaps at Luther, commenting on his race and saying, "Never, never, never have I suffered such impudence from servants . . . in my own son's house." In this one, intense, emotionally charged scene she shows the face of an overt racist. She reveals her contempt for black servants, especially if they talk back to her. This kind of behavior is easily identified and therefore more easily confronted than Anne's and Michael's behavior.

In the commencement address for Washington University's class of 1992, Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund, said that in order to combat racism, people should never accept racist remarks in their presence. In the context of a social conversation, one person can make others aware of the unacceptableness of racism. A reader of Hughes's story is immediately aware of Mrs. Carraway's attitude and, were it possible, might make a comment to her about it.

But in the case of Anne and Michael, their behavior seems polite and supportive. A comment about their behaviors might seem to be insensitive toward the Carraways themselves. They support minority artists by attending their theaters and clubs and by inviting them into their home. But these acts are selfishly motivated by their desire to collect "things black." This phony support is the kind of unintentional racism that is difficult to confront.

Anne and Michael are selfish. When they first hire Luther "to look after the garden," it seems that they are doing him a favor. But "they had to have some excuse to hire him," and soon Luther is only posing for Anne's paintings. They both indulge Luther, letting him wander about the house without a shirt. He "had grown a bit familiar" too, drinking their wine and smoking their cigarettes. Luther even came upstairs when they "had guests who didn't share their enthusiasm for Negroes." The Carraways react as they would to an unruly pet that disturbs the company.

But since Anne's picture is not finished, "they kept him," even though "Michael said he was getting a little bored with the same Negro always in the way." But after Mrs. Carraway insists that they fire him, and they do so without protest. Anne's only concern

at this point is for "her Boy on the block," her "black boy." Luther says, "Don't worry bout me," a sentiment that is not a concern for the Carraways. They only worry about themselves.

Hughes has addressed this theme in other short stories. In the opening paragraphs of the short story "Who's Passing for Who?" Hughes says that people like the Carraways are little more than "kindhearted and well-meaning bores." One can only guess what the parties at the Carraways' house were like, but since few of the invited guests ever returned, it might be assumed that these "rather slow parties" were populated by the "well-meaning bores" Hughes has identified. The whites in "Who's Passing," are identified as "overearnest uplifters" who patronize clubs in Harlem and buy drinks for black artists. They are the guests of a black man, Caleb, who bore their newfound black audience with their stuffy attitudes and effusive comments about having "never met" black artists before. Despite the fact that they usually "gather around to help" blacks, they have little to offer "except their company— which is often appallingly dull."

The Carraways, in the other tale, also seem to bore others whenever they are present. At parties that include blacks, "they gushed over them." But the "Negroes didn't seem to love Michael and Anne" as much as they loved the black folks. Michael and Anne do not recognize the impact they have had on those they have met. Instead, they see what they want to see: idealized figures who represent "the jungle," and who are "utterly Negro."

It was not widely accepted in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s for African Americans to speak out about racial and social injustice. Therefore, Hughes took a low-key approach to this touchy issue. When he attended Columbia University in 1924, he faced racism in very personal ways. In the poem, "Theme for English B" he addressed the situation. An instructor's assignment was an essay for English class, which Hughes wrote in the form of a poem. In it, Hughes said that the instructor (who was white) was as much a part of him (a black student) as he was a part of the instructor, because they interacted with each other regardless of their intentions.

Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.

/ Nor do I often want to be a part of you. / But we are, That's true! / As I learn from you, / I guess you learn from me— / although you're older— and white— / and somewhat more free.

These simple lines revealed Hughes's desire to raise the issue of race with his professor without creating a potentially inflammatory situation. He did not call for confrontation nor did he make demands. His poem quietly asked to be recognized as an individual human being.

That is also the point of his short story. He created whites in "Slave" who were patronizing and condescending in their attempts to keep blacks in a subservient position. In "Who's Passing" he cast the whites as overbearing and well-meaning,

without real substance to their desires to "help." In both cases he called for understanding and acceptance of the individual as a human, not part of a collective, and not because of skin color. He did not preach in the stories or the poem; rather he held up a mirror for the white society to see what it was doing. Although Hughes never said that individual acceptance is the key to the solution of this troublesome issue, that message is there. It is up to the reader to find it.

Source: Carl Mowery, for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #3

Bone is an American critic and educator who specializes in African-American literature as well as Shakespeare. In the excerpt below, he gives an analysis of Hughes's short fiction.

Pastoral, whose source is disillusionment with courtly life, contains within itself the seeds of satire. The higher the degree of alienation from the life-style of courtiers and kings, the greater the tendency toward satire. Langston Hughes is essentially a satirist, at least in the short-story form. His first book of stories, *The Ways of White Folks,* might well have been subtitled "In Dispraise of Courtly Life." The pride and pretentiousness, arrogance and hypocrisy, boorishness and inhumanity of white folks are the targets of his caustic prose. The genius of Langston Hughes, which is a gift for comedy and satire, is thus displayed within the broad outlines of the pastoral tradition.

Within the context of its times, however, *The Ways of White Folks* functioned as anti pastoral. The early, or ascending phase of the Harlem Renaissance was dominated by the myth of primitivism. Hughes himself, during what may be described as the undergraduate phase of his career, conformed substantially to the requirements of the myth. The late, or declining phase of the Renaissance, however, was increasingly antagonistic to the stereotype of the Negro as primitive. Finely tuned as always to the climate of the times, Hughes joined forces with such authors as Wallace Thurman and Sterling Brown to discredit the myth and challenge its pastoral assumptions. . . .

It is against this background that we must seek to comprehend Hughes' career as a short-story writer. After a brief experimental period in 1927-1928, he turned to serious professional work in 1933. During that year he wrote fourteen stories, all of which were published in *The Ways of White Folks.* Retaining this momentum, in 1934 he wrote eleven more, most of which were collected some years later in *Laughing to Keep from Crying.* From 1935 to 1939 there was a tapering off (only five stories), as he turned from fiction to drama. A year at Hollow Hills Farm in 1941 produced a cluster of four stories. In 1943 the first Simple sketch appeared, and from that date until his death in 1967 Hughes wrote only seven tales. . . .

An end to white paternalism was one of the things that the Renaissance was all about. Hughes' literary manifesto, ["The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain"], in the *Nation* was nothing if not a declaration of independence. Yet paradoxically, it was promulgated by a writer who depended on a series of white patrons for his daily bread. The stark reality of the New Negro movement was that Hughes and his contemporaries were dependent in many ways on white patrons, impresarios, editors, agents, critics, and ordinary members of the reading public. It was an agonizing dilemma, which neither Hughes nor the generation of which he was a leading spokesman was able to resolve.

The Ways of White Folks was at bottom an attempt to come to grips with this dilemma. Hughes' solution was to strike a satirical stance toward his former patron and the world that she represents. In this way, he was able to preserve an essential dignity and self-

respect, even while living rent-free in Noel Sullivan's cottage at Carmel. His experience with Mrs. Mason had left him in a satirical frame of mind. He was more than ready for a caustic treatment of white folks, rich folks, or pompous and pretentious folks of any hue. This turn to satire, moreover, involved a momentary shift from poetry to prose. For a brief period, the short-story form became the growing edge of his career.

The unmasking of hypocrisy became his central theme. The emotional source of this impulse was of course his father, who made a show of fatherly concern which in fact he didn't feel. By a process of transference, Hughes attributed the sins of his delinquent father to the patrons of the Harlem Renaissance. They too, he had come to feel, were lacking in a genuine commitment to the cause that they espoused. This is the burden of several stories in *The Ways of White Folks.*

Eleven of [this book's] . . . fourteen tales are satires, and the rest contain satiric elements. The book was born in a sense of personal affront. Wounded by his former patron, Hughes lashes back at white paternalism in all its forms. His objects of attack include delinquent parents, domineering patrons, unscrupulous employers, and self-appointed missionaries in whatever guise. In the caustic language of H. L. Mencken (it is no accident that two of these stories first appeared in the *American Mercury*), Hughes excoriates the guile and mendacity, self-deception and equivocation, insincerity and sanctimoniousness, sham, humbug, and sheer fakery of white America in all its dealings with the black minority.

The author's personal pique is obvious enough, and to lift the curse of his vindictiveness toward Mrs. Mason, Hughes assumes a mask of genial humor. His comic muse is most apparent in such light satires as "Slave on the Block," "A Good Job Gone," and "Rejuvenation Through Joy." Hughes is a gifted humorist, but it would be an error to construe this gift in narrow literary terms. Rather it constitutes a lusty adaptation to his life circumstances. Nourished by the boundless absurdities of American racism, this humor is, by the author's own account, a matter of "laughing to keep from crying." But "laughing to keep from hating" may be closer to the mark. In any case, a humor of diverse tonalities is an essential feature of Hughes' satiric mask.

Irony . . . is the satirist's linguistic mode. Hughes is a resourceful ironist whose verbal indirections often saturate his tales. Among his favorite rhetorical devices are ironic understatement (to intensify, while seeming to diminish, the satirical attack); ironic inversion (to apportion praise or blame by indirection); ironic reversal (to add an element of shock or surprise to the attack); and ironic repetition or refrain (to create a cumulative tension that is finally discharged against the satiric victim). These are but a few of the devices by which Hughes is able to control his anger and simulate the coolness and detachment of effective satire.

Two standards of morality are juxtaposed in Hughes' satiric fiction: a white and Negro code. This division is the basis of the bipartite structure of his tales. He begins with the arraignment of a white society which constantly betrays its own professed ideals. But at some point a Negro character is introduced who embodies a different and more authentic moral code. This character— whether maid-of-all-work, kitchen boy, janitor, or

jazz musician— provides the low norm by which the conduct of the whites is judged and found wanting. For the whites, despite their wealth and power, are failures as human beings, while the blacks, despite their poverty and vulnerability, are tough and resourceful and certain to survive. . . .

Source: Robert Bone, "Langston Hughes," in his *Down Home: Origins of the Afro-American Short Story,* Columbia University Press, 1988, pp. 239-71.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt from a longer essay, Bruck provides a social, literary, and historical perspective on Hughes's short fiction, concentrating on the collection The Ways of White Folks.

Langston Hughes (1902-1967), according to many critics "poet laureate of Harlem" and "Dean of American Negro Writers," began his literary career by winning a poetry contest sponsored by the black magazine *Opportunity* in 1925. "The Weary Blues" was noted by Carl Van Vechten, through whose sponsorship Hughes was able to get his first contract with the noted publisher Alfred Knopf. Van Vechten, who acted as a main ambassadorial advisor and patron of black literature to white publishing firms during the 1920's, not only paved the way for Hughes' literary career but also became the "chief architect of his early success." Just as with [Paul Laurence] Dunbar and [Charles Waddell] Chesnutt, white patronage played a decisive role in the literary emergence of Langston Hughes. The omnipresence of the white patron with his significant socio-literary influence on the black author was a discovery that the young Hughes was still to make; his gradual and painstaking emancipation from the grip of such white patrons was to become the major concern of his early phase and to play a dominant theme in his short fiction . . . .

Although his first stories, all reflecting the author's experiences as a seaman on a voyage along the West coast of Africa, were already published in Harlem's literary magazine *The Messenger* in 1927, it took another six years before Hughes really devoted himself to writing short fiction. From the spring of 1932 to the fall of 1933 he visited the Soviet Union and the Far East. It was during his stay in Moscow that he had a decisive reading experience [having read D. H. Lawrence's collection *The Lovely Lady*] which prompted him to devote himself to the short story. . . . The years to come were to see amazing results from this literary initiation. Between 1933 and 1934 he devoted himself exclusively to this genre.

[*The Ways of White Folks,*] which received rather favorable reviews, presents, thematically, a close examination of black-white relationships. Mostly satirical in tone, the stories try to unmask several manifestations of the Harlem Renaissance. Specifically, the theme of white patronage, as displayed in "Slave on the Block," "Poor Little Black Fellow," and "The Blues I'm Playing," is used to demonstrate the dishonesty of whites and the absurd notion of their paternalistic philanthropy. In this context, it is of particular socio-literary interest to note that Hughes' fictional treatment of the incipient dissociation from white predominance caused him no setback in magazine publication. Instead, his new literary efforts soon found their way into leading periodicals. Whereas Hughes' poetry was usually printed in such black journals as *Opportunity* and *The Crisis* (he had complained in 1929 that "magazines used very few stories with Negro themes, since Negro themes were considered exotic, in a class with Chinese or East Indian features), four out of his five stories written in Moscow were now accepted and published by such noted periodicals as *The American Mercury, Scribner's Magazine* and *Esquire.* This major breakthrough provided him with a nation-wide, non-parochial

platform, allowing him to escape from his predicament, and opened up the opportunity of gaining a primarily white reading audience. . . .

Despite favorable reviews, the first issue of *The Ways of White Folk* sold only 2500 copies. This meagre success may be accounted for not only by the fact that Hughes had not yet gained, as he was to do later with his "Simple Tales," a genuine black reading audience; the commercial failure also seems to demonstrate that with the end of the Harlem Renaissance the potential white audience no longer shared a larger enthusiasm in black literary products. From a historical and socio-literary perspective, however, the stories of *The Ways of White Folk* caused a major breakthrough in paving the way for a racially unrestricted audience. By re-examining the black-white relationships of the 1920's and by unmasking the falseness of the enthusiasm of whites for the 'New Negro,' [Donald C. Dickinson states that] Hughes "clarified for the Negro audience their own strength and dignity and . . . supplied the white audience with an explanation of how the Negro feels and what he wants." Six years after the publication of this collection, Richard Wright, in a review of Hughes' autobiography *The Big Sea,* perhaps summed up the importance of the early works of Hughes best. In his eyes, Hughes, on account of his extensive publications, had served as a "cultural ambassador for the case of the blacks."

Source: Peter Bruck, "Langston Hughes: 'The Blues I'm Playing' (1934)," in *The Black American Short Story in the*

20th Century: A Collection of Critical Essays, edited by Peter Bruck, B. R. Gruner Publishing Co., 1977, pp. 71-84.

Critical Essay #5

Turpin was an American novelist, dramatist, and editor. In the excerpt below, he presents "Slave on the Block" as an example of Hughes's successful use of satire.

Langston Hughes's "Slave on the Block" is a penetrating, satirical portraiture of arty, "liberal" whites, represented by Michael and Anne Carraway in this short story. Ostensibly it is the story of a young Negro migrated to New Jersey from the deep South, who has come to retrieve the belongings of his Aunt Emma, lately deceased in the employ of the Carraways, residents of Greenwich Village. However, the story becomes a vehicle for the author to reveal certain absurdities in the behavior of white employers toward their Negro domestics, and at the same time pungently scathe the stereotypes of Negroes held by certain strata of white America, particularly phony liberals. The ironic twist of the narrative is that the Carraways lose their domestics by the very tactics and attitudes with which they had hoped to retain them.

The first . . . paragraphs of "Slave on the Block" set the tone and prepare the way for what is to happen:

They were people who went in for Negroes Michael and Anne— the Carraways. But not in the social-service, philanthropic sort of way, no. They saw no use in helping a race that was already too charming and naive and lovely for words. Leave them unspoiled and just enjoy them, Michael and Anne felt. So they went in for the Art of Negroes— the dancing that had such jungle life about it, the songs that were so simple and fervent, the poetry that was so direct, so real. They never tried to influence that art, they only bought it and raved over it, and copied it. For they were artists, too. (pp. 64-5)

They were acquainted with lots of Negroes, too— but somehow the Negroes didn't seem to like them very much. Maybe the Carraways gushed over them too soon. Or maybe they looked a little like poor white folks, although they were really quite well off. . . . As much as they loved Negroes, Negroes didn't seem to love Michael and Anne. But they were blessed with a wonderful colored cook and maid— until she took sick and died in her room in their basement. . . .

And the place of their maid's abode and death tells the reader something very pertinent about Michael and Anne.

Into these circumstances comes young Luther, "as black as all the Negroes they'd ever known put together." Anne describes Luther: "He *is* the jungle. . . ." Michael describes him as "He's 'I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray. . . .'" Each adheres to the terms of the Carraway art interest— Anne's in painting, Michael's in music. And Hughes, no doubt at this point, was having a chuckling good time all by himself.

Luther becomes a combination houseboy, model for Anne, and purveyor of Negro music for Michael. They inform him that they "loved your aunt so much. She was the best cook we ever had."

The redoubtable foil of the Carraways, however, is Mattie, their fortyish but still sexually active replacement for Luther's lately mourned aunt. She proceeds to enlighten the young man about the ways of his new environment, downtown and uptown, and especially her favorite Harlem haunts. Soon they are sleeping together, to the momentary shock of the Carraways but without their disapproval. "It's so simple and natural for Negroes to make love," is Anne's blithe comment. And when Lut-her, as a result of his nocturnal forays to Harlem night-spots with Mattie, culminating in carnal calisthenics during the wee hours, poses somnolently for Anne, she decides to do a painting of him, entitled "The Sleeping Negro." Following this, she asks him to pose in the half-nude for her painting dubbed "The Boy on the Block," with a New Orleans slave auction background. Michael, not to be outdone by his wife,

. . . went to the piano and began to play something that sounded like "Deep River" in the jaws of a dog, but

. . . said it was a modern slave plaint, 1850 in terms of 1933. Vieux Carre remembered on 135th Street. Slavery in the Cotton Club.

As a consequence of these contretemps, the servant-master-mistress relationships in the Carraway establishment becomes strained, if not dissipated, since the "boy" from the South no longer is the likeable, "child-like creature he first appeared to be by Carraway standards. He takes all sort of liberties, strolling about in the half-nude, availing himself of Carraway potables and cigaretts. The breaking point is reached upon the appearance of Michael's Kansas City mother— the apotheosis of Philip Wiley's "Mom," who, after an affront by Luther, gets her son to dismiss both servants summarily. Mattie's reaction to this is Hughes' final thrust at the phony white type he is satirizing:

"Yes, we'll go," boomed Mattie from the doorway, who had come up from below, fat and belligerent.

"We've stood enough foolery from you white folks! Yes, we'll go. Come on, Luther." What could she mean, "stood enough?" What had they done to them, Anne and Michael wondered. They had tried to be kind. "Oh!" "Sneaking around knocking on our door at night," Mattie went on. "Yes, we'll go. Pay us! Pay us!" So she remembered the time they had come for Luther at night. That was it.

And to complete the Carraway's bouleversement, Luther hands the roses he has gathered from the small garden he had nurtured to Anne, saying:

"Good-bye . . . . You fix the vases." He handed her his armful of roses, glanced impudently at old Mrs. Carraway and grinned— grinned that wide, beautiful white-toothed grin that made Anne say when she first saw him, "He looks like the jungle."

Grinned and disappeared in the dark hall, with no shirt on his back. "Oh," moaned Anne distressfully, "my 'Boy on the Block'!" "Huh!" snorted Mrs. Carraway.

In his "Slave on the Block," it is obvious that Hughes is having a gleeful time stilettoing his satirical prey. Yet, the ring of truth chimes from the piece. He has caught with eye and ear the totality of his subject. At the same time we can see here the piercing of the stereotype image which still haunts the white mind in many quarters.

Source: Waters E. Turpin, "Four Short Fiction Writers of the Harlem Renaissance—Their Legacy of Achievement," in *CLA Journal,* Vol. XI, No. 1, September, 1967, pp. 59-72.

Topics for Further Study

Think of some examples of times when you have heard irony used in informal contexts, such as conversation. What are some of the differences and similarities between the kinds of irony you find in literature and in casual speech? What is so powerful about irony? As a writing exercise, identify an issue you feel strongly about and try to make your point by using irony.

Hughes is known primarily as a blues poet. Much of his poetry based is on blues rhythms and themes, and he incorporates the lyrics of several songs into "Slave on the Block." Listen to some blues music and do some research about the history of this musical form. How do blues themes reflect on the conflicts and issues that Hughes raises in the story?

Identify some white artists, writers, or musicians who draw on African-American culture for their inspiration, either from Hughes's generation or from your own. With Hughes's criticism of the Carraways in mind, analyze the work of these artists in terms of the way they represent black people and culture. Can you see any of the same stereotypes described in the story at work, such as exoticism, simplicity, or sexuality? What are some of the other conclusions about race relations you can draw from the work of these artists?

Despite the fact that Hughes is extremely critical of the Carraways' racial attitude in the story, he portrays them as human and their prejudice as a form of weakness. Find some psychological studies of prejudice and racism. What are the existing theories, and which do you find most useful or convincing? Do any of these theories seem to pertain the interpersonal dynamics described in the story or give you a new way of understanding the characters?

Compare and Contrast

1930s: White mob violence and economic depression in the south, and higher-paying industrial jobs in the north, encourage African-Americans to move to northern cities in a vast relocation known as The Great Migration.

1990s: The trend of "white flight" from the cities to the suburbs, which began in the 1970s, remains evident, with blacks making up the majority in most urban centers. Since the 1970s, southern as well as northern cities have become a common destination for African-Americans.

1930s: In the 1930s, public schools, public transportation, and other public places are legally segregated by race throughout the South. A 1935 survey of southern schools finds that an average of $17.04 is spent on each black student as compared to $49.30 for each white student. The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) begins a series of lawsuits in accordance with the Supreme Court's provision that facilities may separate but must be of equal quality, eventually culminating in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Only about 5 percent of eligible blacks in the South are registered to vote. Arthur W. Mitchell of Chicago is the first African American elected to the House of Representatives. Over the course of the decade, there are 111 recorded lynchings. Anti-lynching legislation is introduced.

1990s: A Harvard University study shows that racial segregation is rising to levels not seen since 1968. It finds that 66 percent of African-American students attend predominantly minority schools. A record number of 40 members of the U.S. Congress are black. The Supreme Court sets limits on the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

1939: *Gone with the Wind,* a heroic portrayal of a white southern family's struggle during and after the Civil War, is a hit movie. Hattie McDaniel, who plays a loyal slave and servant, becomes the first African-American woman to win an Academy Award. Boxer Joe Lou-is becomes world champion. Undefeated until his 1949 retirement, he remains a symbol of black power and achievement among African Americans.

1990s: Television talk-show host Oprah Winfrey is one of the top-ten wealthiest entertainers in the United States. She is the only African-American named as one of the ten most admired women in a national poll.

What Do I Read Next?

Montage of a Dream Deferred (1951), a collection of Hughes's poetry dealing with the pleasures and disappointments of Harlem's urban world. In this book, as in much of his poetry, Hughes refers to the rhythms and themes of the African-American musical tradition of the blues.

The Best of Simple (1961), a compilation of tales that Hughes wrote featuring the urban folk hero Jesse B. Simple, a character he invented for a column in the *Chicago Defender* in the 1940s. Hughes uses oral story-telling methods in these witty, comic, ironic sketches about everyday people.

The Collected Stories by D. H. Lawrence, a British modernist whose work greatly influenced Hughes. Hughes admired Lawrence's bold, direct style of psychological analysis and social critique. One story in this collection, "The Lovely Lady," which is about a controlling elderly woman who reminded Hughes of his mentor Mrs. Mason, directly inspired him to write *The Ways of White Folks*.

Dubliners (1914) by James Joyce, who is considered one of the most important and influential modernist writers. This early collection of short stories forms a scrupulously realistic group portrait of the way of life in the city of Dublin. Critics have pointed out that *The Ways of White Folks* is comparable to *Dubliners* in that they both assemble stories about different characters who live in the same city to create a complex vision of a particular time and place.

Home to Harlem (1928) by Caribbean emigre and Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay. Concerning the colorful adventures and exploits of black citizens of Harlem, this novel was important in defining the Harlem style and was the only Harlem Renaissance novel published in the 1920s to become a best-seller.

Quicksand and Passing (1929), a set of two novellas by Nella Larsen, another Harlem Renaissance writer. Both novellas center on mixed-race characters who struggle to find their place in a racially segregated society. The narratives deal with the assumptions that blacks and whites have about each other, with emphasis on how women experience race and racism.

Black No More (1931) by George Schuyler, a satirical novel about the obsession with skin color in the United States. The plot revolves around a young black man who becomes white thanks to a scientific discovery, and the trouble that ensues.

Black Like Me (1960) by John Howard Griffin, a nonfiction account of a white man who alters his appearance, and travels through the United States passing for black. The book describes trials of racism against blacks from a white point of view, painting a grim picture of American race relations.

Further Study

Anderson, Jervis. *This Was Harlem.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981.

A lively account of life in Harlem during the Renaissance era, focusing on the black entertainment scene.

Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea: An Autobiography.* New York: Hill and Wang, 1940.

Hughes's autobiographical account of his life as a young writer, up until shortly before the time he wrote *The Ways of White Folks.*

Lewis, David Levering. *When Harlem Was in Vogue.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

A thorough and readable analysis of the historical and cultural factors behind the Harlem Renaissance.

Ostrom, Hans. *Langston Hughes: A Study of the Short Fiction.* New York: Twayne, 1993.

Provides a clear and in-depth critical interpretation of Hughes's short stories and also reprints a series of contemporaneous reviews of this material.

Bibliography

Anderson, Sherwood. A review of *The Ways of White Folks* in *The Nation,* July 11, 1934. Reprinted in *Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives Past and Present,* edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K. A. Appiah, New York, Amistad Books, 1993, p. 18.

DuBois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folks,* New York, Bantam Books, 1989.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. Preface to *Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives Past and Present,* edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K. A. Appiah, New York, Amistad Books, 1993, pp. ix-xii.

Graham, Maryemma. "The Practice of a Social Art," in *Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives Past and Present,* edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K. A. Appiah, New York, Amistad Books, 1993, p. 213-36.

Ostrom, Hans. *Langston Hughes: A Study of the Short Fiction,* New York, Twayne Publishers, 1993.

Rampersad, Arnold. *The Life of Langston Hughes,* Vol. 1, New York, Oxford University Press, 1986.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535