



“A Voice of Black America”

by Rachael Malstead

Langston Hughes chronicled the spirit, fervor, and intensity of the Harlem Renaissance as only an artist can. In his short story collection, *The Ways of White Folks*, Hughes concerns himself with the downtrodden, the poor and lonely, the black and oppressed. The transcendent insight into the human condition that crafts this anthology is unique to an author of genius. Hughes imagines stories from differing class and color perspectives, revealing distinctive personhood and complex individuality through the lens of racial adversity set in early twentieth century America. Hughes intertwines threads of female sexuality and racial divide to create a tapestry of black and white tragedy nuanced by injustice and relational complexity.

The collection begins with a turbulent story titled 'Cora Unashamed.' Hughes explores the restrictions that cause relationships between white females and men of color to be destroyed in this tragedy. White female sexuality is a commodity to be violently protected; its sanctity outweighed the importance of familial relationships or humane treatment. After Jessie, a young white woman, is found carrying the child of a non-Caucasian man outside of wedlock, her mother forces her to have an abortion. Following the death of the

forbidden baby, Jessie dies, leaving Cora, her beloved black servant, wretched with grief. At Jessie's funeral, in the midst of a quiet ceremony, Cora's screams rupture the prose, 'They killed you and your child. I told 'em you loved it, but they didn't care. They killed it before it was...' until she is dragged away by Jessie's white relatives (Hughes 17). Cora, the only person who truly cared for Jessie, is silenced by the very people who are responsible for Jessie's murder. Hughes depicts this scene of inhumanity to expose the consequences of interfering with white female sexuality. Jessie and her lover are subjected to an unmerciful end at the Puritanical discretion of long-entrenched persecution concerning race and sexuality.

Later on in the collection, Hughes offers his readers a different perspective on white female sexuality. A white businesswoman named Miss Briggs is middle-aged and unmarried, without family or friend, she has 'nobody at all' (Hughes 163). Yet she is satisfied with her life, even more so when a little dog catches her attention in a store window, and she brings home a fluffy, white companion. A routine is settled upon that includes the janitor of the building Miss Briggs lives in bringing bones for her canine friend thrice a week. Life proceeds much as before

until a new janitor replaces the old one, and begins bringing bones for her little dog to eat every day. Miss Briggs begins to fall in love with him, hungry for the kindness she perceives in his ‘softly beautiful voice’ and ‘big kind face’ (Hughes 168, 171). Yet her love is forbidden in every way; the man is married with a wife and children, and above all, he is black. Miss Brigg’s misbegotten longing for this man unnerves her to the extent that she moves to a different part of the city, and is quickly ‘forgotten’ by all who were acquainted with her (Hughes 175). The sense of loneliness exuding from this story titled ‘Little Dog’ is palpable evidence of Hughes’ ability to describe the painful constraints surrounding white female sexuality. Miss Brigg’s is unable to explore sexual affection, and even admit her own longings to herself, because she is inhibited by racial conventions. She desires the love of a black man. The only socially acceptable way for her to deal with this love is to remove it from physical existence. Accordingly, loneliness becomes not only a personal state of being but a damning sentence, proclaimed by a white, racist culture.

Similarly, racial injustice rears its ugly head throughout the pages of the collection. In a story incongruously called ‘Home,’ a celebrated black

musician named Roy returns to a little town in America, ill and dying from his disillusionment with life after his musical stint abroad. Roy is affronted with racial discrimination. When a woman he knows enters into polite conversation with him on the street, a violent escalation ensues that ends in Roy’s death when some ‘white young ruffians with red necks’ decide Roy is ‘—insulting a White Woman—attacking a WHITE WOMAN—RAPING A WHITE WOMAN’ (Hughes 47, 48). Hughes illustrates the absurdity of ingrained racism that this story of tragic injustice underscores. Roy, as a black man, was lynched for nothing more than greeting a white woman. Such is the flammable state of white female sexuality in proximity to a black man. It is a sexuality so guarded and confined that even an unfounded suspicion of offense can lead to murder.

Time and time again, the vast reservoir of human kindness remains untapped when the color divide dams its reserves. Even well-meaning white folk are unable to surmount their racial prejudice in several of Hughes’ stories. ‘Poor Little Black Fellow’ relates the confinement of a black adoptee in a wealthy, white ‘Christian’ family. Arnold is treated ever so kindly by the white small-town community as he



grows up but is prohibited the company of young white ladies as he reaches adolescence. When traveling abroad in Europe, Arnold's loneliness emboldens him to knock on the door of a Negro musical group in Paris. They receive him with open arms and he meets a lovely Romanian girl. Arnold's white parents—The Pembertons, are aghast at their black son's blossoming relationship, and judge Vivi the young Romanian, to be a prostitute as the only means of explaining her relationship to a person of color. Though said to be loved and cherished by the Pembertons, Arnold's surrogate father flies into a rage at his adoptee's audacity. Mr. Pemberton cannot help but view Arnold as an inferior person. Hughes describes this white man's offensive internalization when he communicates, 'in the back of his mind was the word nigger,' as Arnold is expunged from their family (Hughes 158). Even though Mr. Pemberton has tried to be kind to Arnold, his good intentions are poisoned by racism. Years of familial relationship could not tear down or even slightly diminish the color divide between Arnold and the Pembertons. The racial abyss between white and black folk was excavated and deepened by the former and gapes incredibly difficult to cross by the latter.

In accordance with this tangible color-line, 'Passing' tells the story of a light-skinned man who hides his Negro bloodlines to live amongst white folk. His ability to pass in white society as a Caucasian earns him a job and a white fiancée at the cost of ending association with his black family. Yet his choice to disguise his race and pass for white entails a personal and communal loss of identity. He must abandon his mother and siblings to adopt a false identity that hangs in an ever precarious balance. At any time he could be found out and imprisoned—or worse. Historically, this white disguise had profoundly tragic implications. Ties of culture, family, and personal identity had to be severed to better one's material prospects as a black person living in a world controlled by white injustice.

Hughes was one of the most significant artistic voices of the Harlem Renaissance. His writing gave voice to black people during this time of change. He aimed to portray realistic black American life by capturing cultural influences and exposing the repercussions of racism. Perhaps the most inscrutable contender to black freedom of expression was the entrenched ways of white folks. Though Hughes voiced racial dilemmas particular to the turn of the twentieth century, the deeply riven

relationship between white people and black people in America that began with slavery still haunts the reality of today. Hughes collection can be read as material that fuels and necessitates movements like Black Lives Matter. Racial injustice rears its ugly head on a day to day basis, often making headlines, continuing to affect the lives of black people on a profound level. These stories that Hughes penned so long ago are the stories people need to read today to understand the ingrained nature of racism in America, and how its effects linger on, through cultural heritage and unconscious assimilation of racial beliefs. Hughes short story collection depicts the long reinforced ethos of racism in America, especially in terms of sexuality and relationships between black and white people. To partake in *The Ways of White Folks* is to be given an intimate communion with characters who speak of a sorrow ridden past.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hughes, Langston. *The Ways of White Folks*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. Print.