

A stylistic analysis of langston hughes



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Langston Hughes is a classic American author whose writing style is, perhaps, one of the most malleable styles in the history of American literature. In the first place, he is among the exclusive echelon of writers to oscillate back and forth in his works between poetry and prose, being so well accomplished in both forms. Beyond this, though, he alters his style in either arena rather often in order to make a formal point; that is, the form and style of his writing is usually different from piece to piece because his writing style is always a tool used to create a motif that communicates substance critical to the work's purpose. Two stories from *The Ways of White Folks* more than adequately exemplify just how much his writing style can morph from work to work, and they also highlight how Hughes uses these stylistic changes.

Langston Hughes writes “Red-Headed Baby” about a white seaman named Clarence who sails into the port of a Black town in the south and looks up a Black girl named Betsy with whom he once had sex. He has every intention of having sex with her again, but he discovers a two-year-old at the girl's house that has the same red hair he has. He finds himself unable to handle the realization that he has a colored son, so rather than have sex with Betsy as he initially planned, he leaves hurriedly.

The narrative style is of a very poetic prose, and it is important to note that it is written differently from much of Hughes's narration. It is rife with incomplete sentences that convey complete thoughts, and the reader is deliberately led to realize that the narration is, more or less, representative of Clarence's train of thought. As the protagonist of the story, Clarence shapes the primary point of view in the text, narrating with his thoughts and

even presumably talking aloud to himself, vocalizing some of these thoughts. This causes his narrative voice to bleed into his dialogue.

The significance of this narrative style is that Hughes uses the punctuation of these complete thoughts to show the reader Clarence's varying levels of anxiety. The more anxious he gets, the more these thoughts begin to run together. The narrative structure resorts to a series of run-on sentences, for example, when he discovers the child and recognizes it as unmistakably his. The narration also gets more poetic as certain allusions Clarence makes in his mind become like refrains because they show up more than once (e. g. "goggly-eyed dolls you hit with a ball at the County Fair" or "three shots for a quarter like a loaded doll").

Throughout the story, Clarence's perspective typifies Blacks as subhuman and lowly. He uses what he sees on a person's outward appearance as a measure for that person's worth. The visual perception of color in a person's skin devalues them from Clarence's perspective, so it is situationally ironic that the boy, also named Clarence, would be described by his great aunt as blind—not because he cannot see but because he does not place any importance on what he sees at all. Clarence also dominates the text with his own perspective by narrating so thoroughly. His voice dominates not only the narration but also the dialogue, and the majority of the text is in his voice; the few words that Betsy and the Old Woman speak are filtered through Clarence's narrative voice inasmuch as Hughes never introduces quotes with "Betsy said" or "the Old Woman replied," which means he shapes the narrative completely. He establishes the value system for human worth. This makes it equally ironic that his namesake never speaks and is

described as deaf. Hughes seems to suggest that all the senses Clarence abuses are absent in his son.

Hughes presents the implicit binary of black/white, but he also presents an explicit opposition of red/yellow. Betsy is an interracial child herself, mixed with Black and White, but the reader only knows that the colored part of her is Black because Clarence refers to Betsy, her aunt, and everyone in the town as “niggers.” In other words, the term, Black, is never actually used; rather, she is constantly referred to as “yellow.” The pejorative slur, nigger, is derived from the word, negro, which means black specifically, so in a literal sense, it is contradictory that Betsy be called a nigger and yellow, as opposed to black, which evinces the inequity of Whites’ rules on race. The system they established essentially referred to a person as Black for having any noticeable trace of Black in them even if they were more White than Black, as if to suggest the White ethnicity had been tainted and could no longer be called White. This is the racist logic behind terms like mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon.

In “A Good Job Gone,” Hughes writes from the perspective of a young, African American boy who works as a servant for a wealthy, White man named Mr. Lloyd. The young boy narrates the story, telling his experience to some other boy. He explains that this was the best paying job he’d ever had. Mr. Lloyd paid him twenty dollars a week and would often slip him fives for miscellaneous tasks or when he was leaving for several days, and more significantly, Mr. Lloyd had no qualms with Blacks, which made him treat the narrator well.

The ultimate commentary on Whites stems from how much of a rarity Mr. Lloyd is. He is a peculiar White man in that his wife is paralyzed, so he cannot have sex with her. He is also a depressed man who treats his depression with drinking and womanizing. Even more than the depression, though, it is pregnant with meaning that Mr. Lloyd loses his sanity after the heartbreak he experiences with what the narrator calls a Jane from Harlem named Pauline, which suggests that he had been on the edge of sanity all along. The implication becomes that only an insane, White man could be so comfortable with Blacks, and after reading of his loss of sanity, the reader is led to retrospectively question the narrator's comments about Mr. Lloyd's fair treatment of him as no longer being evidence of him being a good man but, rather, a man so desperate for companionship that he couldn't afford to cut Blacks out.

Perhaps the most interesting binary opposition in the text is that of Riverside Drive/Harlem. The story establishes these two places as antitheses of one another, and this opposition of settings facilitates the story entirely. The majority of the story occurs in Riverside Drive where Mr. Lloyd lives since the narrator is almost always there maintaining Mr. Lloyd's house even when Mr. Lloyd is gone, so Riverside Drive is given presence for most of the text while Harlem is given absence with the exception of one scene in which Mr. Lloyd finds Pauline with her colored lover. This adds presence/absence as an associated binary opposition. Additionally, due to Mr. Lloyd's incessant womanizing, another binary opposition that works in tandem with these is that of man/woman. Finally, there is the obvious binary of White/Black due to the importance of Mr. Lloyd's peculiar acceptance of Blacks as a White man.

In each of these oppositions, certain terms receive privilege. Riverside Drive is privileged over Harlem, for example, because it is given the most presence and because it is implicitly described as the wealthy side of town, as opposed to Harlem where Blacks live. In general, presence is given privilege instead of absence because the characters that are present are the characters that drive the plot. The narrator is the most present character in the text, and Mr. Lloyd is the second-most present character. They dominate the text, yet Mr. Lloyd's paralyzed wife is only mentioned from time to time, never seen; this makes her absent, and her absence evinces her powerlessness in the text. She has no power to keep Mr. Lloyd from sleeping with all these other women because she is trapped in White Plains, a different area altogether. Ultimately, the text privileges man over woman also because Mr. Lloyd controls how long the women he sees stay with him and when they leave, which sets up the most significant contradiction to come later. These binary oppositions establish a classist, sexist, racist hierarchy with whiteness, wealth, and masculinity at the top. The contradictions come from Pauline, a Black woman in need of money from Harlem, who claims the power and privilege in the end. Mr. Lloyd falls helplessly in love with her, and she does not reciprocate; rather, she uses him for his money just as every White woman has, and the difference is that she is the first to break up with him. She takes the power from him and upsets the hierarchy, reversing all the oppositions and bestowing privilege upon blackness, poverty (for lack of a better word), and femininity. Even the narrator ultimately loses his good job because of her, which means Pauline's power affects him as well.

There are also contradictions even among the original, privileged terms. Whereas both whiteness and masculinity are privileged, they conflict with one another in the case of the White women with whom Mr. Lloyd has his affairs because, of course, none of these women have any evidence of power despite being White. Their femininity should not cancel out their whiteness, yet it does; consequently, the text evinces inequity even among the privileges.

In both of these pieces, Hughes uses his writing style to give the narrator's the most realistic voices he can. He makes the reader feel as though he or she has met these characters in real life. This is what makes his writing style so incredibly malleable. He is able to stylistically transform his writing into whatever is most conducive to an evocative reading experience, and he does this to such an extent that it becomes very difficult to say with any real certainty what Hughes's tendencies are apropos of formal mechanics like punctuation, diction, or vernacular.