

Intentional ambiguity: through actions and words (soul gone home) essay sample

[Family](#), [Mother](#)



Langston Hughes's *Soul Gone Home* depicts a struggling relationship between a mother and her son. Ronnie, the son, has just died, and the manuscript portrays a scene of his true feelings, now that he is dead and can speak his mind. His harsh words hit the mother in the heart, as she now is being accused of maternal ignorance. However, the words don't paint the whole picture. Hughes's dark imagery is emphasized through the exaggerated gestures and stage directions he dictates, conveying the complicated and often ambiguous feelings about the relationship between the mother and her child.

The opening act of the play sets up this dark imagery, giving us a first glimpse at the complex family relations. As indicated by the introducing stage direction, "As the curtain rises, his mother, a large, middle-aged woman in a red sweater, kneels weeping beside the cot, loudly simulating grief" (Hughes 535). Right off the bat, we as readers are led to make assumptions about what is going on, even before the dialogue begins. At a first look, it seems to be a typical relationship, a mother kneeling down, grieving beside her dying son. However, throughout the play, the ambiguous and even contradicting actions cloud our vision, making it hard to truly understand this family relationship. In the first spoken dialogue, the mother cries out, "Can't you see she's bowed down in sorrow?" (535). Hughes's diction selection is particularly interesting here within the greater syntax. The sentence construction with the mother speaking in third person makes the statement stand out more, and seems to exaggerate her feelings.

The word “ bowed down” adds to this emphasis on the mother’s “ sorrow”. This gesture of bowing down seems to show a deeper sense of respect and grief. However, the over-emphasis the mother goes through to demonstrate her grief seems a little over the top. As the play continues, we are baffled by this bizarre relationship, and do not know with whom to sympathize. The mother’s character is further drawn out through her actions, adding to the ambiguous relationship. After Ronnie starts accusing his mother of being an unsupportive mom, she fires back. His mother is the first to say it wasn’t her fault for the poverty and lack of money. When Ronnie says “’twarnt my fault then” she is quick to snap back (536). The manuscript states, “[defensively] You always was so weak and sickly, you couldn’t earn nothin’ sellin’ papers” (536). Evidently, the mother gets defensive in this argument, as no one wants to take blame for the situation. Both mother and son are quick to point fingers at one another, as the manuscript maintains this character conflict throughout the play. After much yelling on both ends, the mother goes as far as to tell Ronnie he “ ain’t even decent dead” (537).

This is a pretty harsh statement, especially coming from a mom. We as the audience members have no right to pick sides or judge characters though. Rather, this dark, comic- tragedy is meant to leave us with a story, a scene in which to try to understand what Hughes wanted us to see. The whole play is obscure, which Hughes so brilliantly planned. He intended to use the manuscript as a guide for the actors and audience to interpret, and clearly did not favor one character over the other. Seemingly, the play consists of contradictory characters. We are naturally led to conflicting viewpoints: did

Ronnie experience maternal ignorance? Or if his mother really was that poor at providing and caring for him, how do we know he couldn't have done more? He complained a lot about lack of money, but besides the obvious want of it, was it really necessary for his lifestyle.

Obviously, we as audience members are left with thousands of questions and thoughts about whom to have empathy for, but I think that was Hughes's intentions. In a very methodical way, Langston Hughes gave us a glimpse of a conflicting mother-son relationship, without explicitly taking a side as to who was to blame for the son's death. Ultimately, the play is not meant for us to take sides, and determine who morally was a better character. Instead, the manuscript provides us with a story, one Hughes so carefully chose and meant to depict for his readers. We must acknowledge that the manuscript and stage directions are what Hughes chose, how he meant the play to be acted. Although when actually put into action there are bound to be some differences, we should be mindful that this text tells us how Langston Hughes wanted us to view this comic tragedy. The dialogue Hughes provides is like a canvas, it only provides so much; thus, the specific gestures and stage directions are what turn the empty canvas into a masterpiece. The actions don't just fill in the gaps; they bring the play to life. In this sense, Langston Hughes conveyed a family torn apart, through the actions and meanings behind the text.

Works Cited

Hughes, Langston. *Soul Gone Home*. New York: n. p., 1937. Print.