

# Intimacy through point of view in "on the road"



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Langston Hughes' "On the Road" takes place during the depression and chronicles a homeless black man's search for a place to stay the night. This man, Sargeant, first attempts to stay at a parsonage, but is turned down by the Reverend. He then sees the church next to the parsonage and decides he will sleep inside of it. The door is locked and no one answers his knocks, so he pushes against the door and he is able to break the door open. As the door breaks open two cops arrive and try to pull him away from the door, but Sargeant grabs onto a stone pillar at the front of the church and refuses to let go. Gradually, the front of the church falls down, and then the whole thing falls onto the cops and onto Sargeant, who is knocked unconscious by the debris. While unconscious, Sargeant has a dream that he is talking to Christ and at the end of the dream, when Sargeant tries to get on a train, he wakes up and realizes that he is in jail. The intimacy of the second person point of view evokes from the reader a sympathy for Sargeant. This is done through the narrator's use of language, the narrator's omniscience, and the narrator's seeming firsthand knowledge of being in a situation similar to Sargeant's. The narrator uses simple, concise language throughout the story. The uncomplicated prose, along with the second person point of view, allows the reader to feel as if the narrator is a close acquaintance relating the story to him or her. At times, the narrator uses imperfect English, such as "He wasn't on no train" (495) and this blunt, imperfect language gives more credence to the casual and intimate relationship Hughes wanted to create between the narrator and the reader. The narrator also uses very sympathetic terms to describe Sargeant's current state: hungry, sleepy, tired, and cold (492-493). The reader then sees these terms and because of the intimate feelings they share with the narrator (and the fact that those

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intimate feelings lead to a trust in the narrator) begins to feel sympathetic towards Sargeant and his situation. If the narrator were to use less sympathetic terms in describing Sargeant, the reader would not become sympathetic towards Sargeant. This is a result of the reader basing his or her own feelings about the character on the way the narrator describes him, and that is due to the intimacy created by the language and the second person point of view. The narrator's omniscience is used to look into Sargeant's mind, and this explains Sargeant and his situation more thoroughly. For example, after the Reverend denied Sargeant entrance and told him to go to the Relief Shelter, the narrator says " Sargeant wanted to tell the holy man that he had already been to the Relief Shelter, been to hundreds of relief shelters...the beds were always gone and supper was over, the place was full, and they drew the color line anyhow" (493). This insight into Sargeant's past shows that his troubles are not something new to him, that he has been living the life of a vagabond for some time. Sargeant's dream about Christ, (recounted by the narrator as if it weren't a dream,) in which Christ is released from the cross by Sargeant after two thousand years (494), is meant to symbolize that Sargeant still has faith, and that Christ does not discriminate against those who believe in him. Sargeant's thoughts and his dream give a great deal of knowledge to the reader and generate yet more compassion from the reader for Sargeant. Although the identity of the narrator is unknown, it is implied that he (or she) has been in a situation similar to Sargeant's. When describing the hobo jungle, the narrator says " You couldn't see them in the dark, but you knew they were there if you'd ever been on the road, if you had ever lived with the homeless and hungry in a depression" (495). From this, one can conclude that the narrator has lived

or at the least been through places similar to the aforementioned hobo jungle. It is also likely that the reader assumes the narrator to either be black or someone sympathetic to the hardships black people face. This is shown through the symbolism the narrator employs in telling the story. The colors black and white are prevalent throughout the story, not just in describing the people's skin, but in other ways such as Sargeant not noticing the snow, even though it was falling white against the black night (492). The snow symbolizes white oppression, and in order to survive Sargeant has to ignore his oppressors. The implication that the narrator has experienced something similar to Sargeant's situation causes the reader to trust what he (or she) says more; in much the same way someone who has lived through a war is more credible when talking about it than someone who only has read about living through a war. With the intimacy and the additional trust that the reader has with the narrator, the sympathetic feelings for Sargeant increase. Hughes' told this story from the second person perspective not only to get the reader to sympathize with Sargeant, but to sympathize with all black men. Although this story takes place during the depression years (the early 1930's), it was written in 1952, a time when the civil rights movement was gaining steam. Hughes had a deep-seated sense of racial pride, and his life was spent trying to win respect for African-American culture. He used Sargeant's plight to symbolize the similar situations faced by black people. Hughes used the narrator's point of view to produce sympathy from the reader in the hopes that the reader would then sympathize with black people in real life. "On the Road" was not only a story of one man's struggles, but a story of the struggles of an entire race. Although much of his work dealt with the issues faced by African-Americans, the sympathy Hughes was able to evoke

from the reader in this story may not have been matched in any of his other works.