

## Langston Hughes' *Simple as Black Every Man*

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### **Abstract**

*Simple is the most important fictional character of Hughes. He was what many Negroes thought they were. Simple is moulded by racism which has kept him poor, unlettered and hated. The truths that Simple speaks are black realities. Simple touches every aspect of Negro life. As he is realistic he sees both the positive and negative sides. At the same time Simple is fully convinced that despite the hardships and limitation encountered by the Blacks in America, he has the ability to endure and continue.*

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## **Introduction**

Langston Hughes' greatest contribution to African American literature is his Simple stories, centering around the adventures of a gentle ebony hero who is really the mirror image of every black man. Simple is the most important fictional character of Hughes. According to Faith Berry, Simple is "the most enduring contribution to literature" (106) by Langston Hughes. He is a character of epic dimension. Simple is recognized by all as Black everyman and he reflects black truth. He was a replica of the black rank and file. He was truly like most ordinary Negroes. In form and substance he was what many Negroes thought they were. He came from Virginia. In his childhood he 'passed around' among his relatives, after which he gravitated to Harlem with intermediate stops. During one such visit he married and got separated. His personal history typifies in several respects the sociological Negro of his class. Being a product of the broken home he was aware of the intensity of segregation undergone by the Blacks in America.

The setting of the Simple sketches is Harlem, a powerful symbol of blackness. Harlem is the dream of freedom for the enslaved. It is disillusionment, crime and desperation. It is opportunity and home. The warm black beauty of Harlem is vividly presented in "Toast to Harlem", in *Simple Speaks his Mind*.

I love Harlem... It's so full of Negroes...I feel like I got protection...  
You say the houses ain't mine. Well the sidewalk is - don't nobody  
push me off... Here I an't scared to vote - that is another thing I  
like about Harlem . Folks is friendly in Harlem. I feel like I got the  
world in a jug and the stopper in my hand! From Central Park to  
179<sup>th</sup>, from river to river Harlem is mine! Lots of white folks is  
scared to come up here, too, after dark.(31-32)

Characters in the Simple stories are also trustworthy individuals because everyone knows people like them. And the basic trait in them is blackness and the key dimension of it is that it is the response to racism and its effects. Simple's friends in their separate ways adjust to the psychological and economic trap in which they are caught because of their Blackness. Simple's writer friend Boyd is the narrator in these stories. He is a perfect foil to Simple. In the story "Great but Late", the narrator observes that the Supreme Court banned segregation in public schools and decreed against Jim Crow Laws. Simple was not very enthusiastic.

You don't sound very enthused, I said. Of course, the time is long  
over due. But now that it is done, it is something of which democracy  
can be proud.

I don't see nothing to be proud of- just doing what they ought to do, said Simple. If white folks was doing something extra, yes, then be proud. But Negroes have a right to go to decent schools just like everybody else, also to sit on buses. So what's there to be proud be in that they are just now letting us? They ought to be ashamed of themselves for Jim crowing us so long. I might have had a good education myself had it not been for white folks. If they want something to be proud of, let them pay me for all the education I ain't got.(33)

Simple is moulded by racism which has kept him poor, unlettered and hated. He is good, warm, loving and generous. He is wise too. He is keenly conscious of the cruelty shown by the Whites on account of racial difference. In the story "There ought to be a Law" he points out that White man's Congress is busy making laws for the protection of animals while they do very little to protect their fellowmen.

Look here at these head lines, man, where Congress is busy passing laws. While they are making all these laws it looks like to me they ought to make one setting up a few Game Preserves for Negroes... The government protects and takes care of buffaloes and deers – which is more than the government does for me or my kinfolks down South. Last month they lynched a man in Georgia and just today I see where Klan has whipped a Negro within an inch of his life in Alabama... That is what I mean by Game Preserves for Negroes- Congress ought to set aside some place where we can go and nobody can jump on us and beat us, neither lynch us nor Jim Crow us everyday. Colored folks rate as much protection as a buffalo or a deer. ( *Simple Speaks his Mind* 115 – 116)

The truths that Simple speaks are black realities. Simple touches every aspect of Negro life. As he is realistic he sees both the positive and negative sides. At the same time Simple is fully convinced that despite the hardships and limitation encountered by the Blacks in America, he has the ability to endure and continue.

Not only am I half dead right now from pneumonia but everything else has happened to me. I have been cut, shot, stabbed, run over, hit by a car and tromped by a horse. I have also been robbed, fooled, deceived, two-timed, double crossed, dealt seconds, and mighty near Blackmailed – but I am still here!... I have been fired, laid off, and last week given an indefinite vacation, also Jim crowed, segregated,

barred out insulted, eliminated, called back, yellow and red, locked in locked out, locked up also left holding the bag. I have been caught in the rain, caught in raids, caught short with my rent... I have been underfed, underpaid, undernourished, and everything but undertaken. I been bit by dogs, cats, mice, rats, poll parrots, fleas, chiggers, bedbugs, grand-daddies, mosquitoes and a gold toothed woman... In this life I been abused, confused, misused, accused, false arrested, tried, sentenced, paroled, black jacked, beat third degraded and near about lynched!... (112 – 113)

Simple's attempt to express himself through the spoken word could not be expected to come from a well of English undefiled. He speaks a dialect in which demonstrative pronouns were converted into 'dises' and 'dats'. This was in keeping with the proposition that Negroes could not master the approved pronunciations of some English sounds either because of innate biological inadequacies in the organs of speech solely and irremediably attributable to the Negro's African blood or because the Negro ear in its neurological inferiorities simply could not properly hear the nuances of sound imparted to speech by White tongue.

The fact is that he spoke as he did because he did not have the benefit of living during his formative years where people closest around him would have provided him with models of impeccable utterance. It was also because he didn't have much institutionalized linguistic aid that could have served as a corrective. If one is to believe what he says it was because he was not 'colleged'. The proposition that Negroes could not master the approved pronunciation because of neurological inferiorities was also part of the scheme designed by the White masters to segregate and isolate the Blacks. Simple even feels that the segregation was there from the very beginning of creation. He very poignantly asks his writer friend:

'When the Lord said, Let there be light' and there was light', what I want to know is where was us colored people?... We must not of been there, because we are still dark. Either He did not include me or else I were not there' "the Lord was not referring to people when he said, 'let there be light' He was referring to the elements, the atmosphere, the air" said Boyd "He must have included some people", said Simple, because, white people are light, in fact white, whilst I am dark. How come? I say, we were not there.' (176)

This feeling of 'differentness' creates in him a sense that he is an outsider in America and this in turn creates a feeling of rootlessness. He also traces the causes of the economic backwardness of the Blacks to Paradise. His friend Boyd remarks:

But I just wish we colored folks had been somewhere around at the start. I do not know where we was when Eden was a garden but we sure didn't gen in on none of the crops. If we had, we would not be so poor today. White folks started out ahead and they are still ahead. (177)

The holy writ of American racism even now states that most Negroes were departures from nature in their lack of normal human attributes. Even the best known novels of Negro writers abound with grotesque, with people whose distinctive stigma is failure. Negro writers argue that Negroes have been maimed by their environment. Negro characters have been presented as freaks because the super imposed conditions of Negro life make them what they are. The creation of Simple should be seen in this context. Through Simple Hughes is trying to define a Negro. Simple is not a freak. He is an ordinary person who has an understandable distaste for White people who abuse him merely because he is Black. He hates them because they commit acts which contribute to the system that exists solely to perpetrate a continuing series of such abuses.

To Simple, the millennium is far in a distant future. Segregation will not come to an end soon and his cultural deprivation will continue. He is still an outsider. The basic factor behind the creation of Simple is blackness: the key dimension of blackness is the response to racism and the resultant crisis of identity and rootlessness. Congress passed many laws for the preservation of animals but did nothing for the Blacks. Simple observes:

The government is protecting wild life, preserving fish and game, and setting aside big traits of land where nobody can fish, shoot, hunt, nor harm single living creature with furs, fins or feathers. But it did not show a thing about Negroes. (*Simple Speaks His Mind* 181)

Both White people and their government do nothing to create in the Blacks a feeling of belongingness. On the other hand, the attitude of the majority of the Whites creates in them a feeling that they do not belong to the country. The Whites who are the children of Jefferson even today resolve that all men are created equal, that everybody is entitled to life and liberty that the Blacks should be treated right. Even in the army integration has not taken place. Whites are officers and Blacks are ordinary soldiers. Simple was not able to see any Negro officer pinning medals on White men.

Every time I saw a picture in the colored papers of colored soldiers receiving medals in the last war, a white officer was always doing

the pinning. I have not yet seen a picture in no papers of a colored officer pinning a medal on a white soldier. (81)

For Simple, life in America was one of treacherous pitfalls, most of which are due to his condition as an impoverished Black. Life for him is a battle ground and survival requires great fortitude and sagacity. This is true of every Black man in America. Simple is engaged in a quest for freedom and identity. Poverty and social disorganization intensify the identity confusion and displace him from his family:

When I was a wee small child... I had no place to set and think in, being as how I was raised up with three brothers, two sisters, seven cousins, one married aunt, a common law uncle and the minister's grandchild - and the house had only four rooms. I never had no place to sit and think. Neither to set and drink - not even much of my milk before some hongry child scratched it out of my hand. I were not youngest, neither a girl, nor the cutest. I don't know why, but I don't think nobody liked me much.(34)

Simple, is a true representative of the ordinary Blacks of his time. The common Blacks readily identified with him. In other words, he was Negro everyman. He has an understandable distaste for the Whites who abuse him because he is Black. At the same time, he criticizes the nastiness observable in Blacks. Hughes has been able to imprint an indelible impression on the minds of the people of America in general and the Blacks in particular.

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