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Lessons in "Cora Unashamed"

Throughout history we have seen how social classes play a major part in life. It is a way a person can categorize and degrade a certain group. In the short story "Cora Unashamed," by Langston Hughes, Cora Jenkins is a black maid for the Studevant family in Iowa. In this particular town called Melton, the Jenkins family is introduced as the colored family, and the Studevants as the white and wealthy family. The story portrays how in the mid Depression era-- social status, reputation, and education were valued and desired. However, the lower class people didn't had the same rights as people with a higher status, and therefore both families approached life differently.

Social status is understood as one's position in society and how they are seen as important by a certain group. In many cases we see how people with higher social status have certain expectations due to their hierarchy. In the story, Hughes described the Studevants' family as the employer of Cora. However, Mrs. Art is described in more detail because she was a role model in the community. Hughes explains what Mrs. Art thought about her younger daughter named Jessie, "Her mother was always a little ashamed of stupid Jessie, for Mrs. Art was the civic and social leader of Melton, president of the Woman's Club three years straight, and one of the pillar of her church" (Hughes 3). To Mrs. Art it was unpleasant to have a dull-witted daughter. Mrs. Art was not a common citizen in Melton; she had social leadership where she was a superior figure in the woman's club and served the church. Mrs. Art was the character who was

controlling and very self-conscious. She was a great example of a high status member because she cared about what people said and thought about her family. She was the lady of the society who was capable to make decisions involving Melton.

Maintaining a positive reputation is often a goal to people because it is how others perceive them. Reputation is something people tend to protect or become obsessed with. Hughes portrays Mrs. Art and Pa Jenkins, Cora's father, as preoccupied with what others say about them. In the beginning of the story, Pa Jenkins was ashamed of his daughters, who have left town ashamed because they were pregnant, "One by one, the girls left too, mostly in disgrace. 'Ruinin ma name,' Pa Jenkins said, 'Ruinin ma good name! They can't go out berryin' but they come back in disgrace'" (Hughes 2). This shows how reputation was what many people in Melton cared about. Pa Jenkins was not a social leader, unlike Mrs. Art; he was practically insignificant to society and the lowest in the community. However, as he called the pregnancy a 'disgrace' it brings a negative attitude because he didn't approve of their actions. This shows how in Melton having reputation was usually important to the characters, and it didn't matter if they were in a lower class status. The focus on reputation reflects to the title of the story, "Cora unashamed", because unlike most of the members in Melton, Cora was not ashamed about not having a good reputation because she didn't care what others said about her pregnancy. She loved her daughter and didn't think of her as a disgrace; Cora was not like Mrs. Art and Pa Jenkins.

In a society education plays a necessary role in shaping the lives of people. With education a person can improve their economic growth and decrease poverty. Throughout the story, the Studevants were presented as a wealthy family, and therefore they were able to have an education. Hughes depicts how the Studevants' wealth was inherited and it's up to their children to fulfill their careers, "Keneth took over the management of the hardware store that Grandpa

had left. Jack went off to college. Mary was a teacher. Only Jessie remained a child-- her last year in high school. Jessie, nineteen now, and rather slow in her studies, graduating at last. In the Fall she would go to Normal” (Hughes 3). This shows how the Studevants had the opportunity to go to college due to having a good economic status. Since the children were grown, they were responsible to keep Mrs. Art proud by attending to a university. Even Mary, the oldest daughter, was an example of a respectable and educated woman. For Keneth and Jack it was easier for them to choose a career, and know that eventually they would have their own resources. Hughes also writes how it didn't matter if Jessie was not a dedicated student; she was still going to attend college like her siblings.

Sometimes a person cannot continue with their education because they don't have the resources and all they can do is work. Hughes depicts how Cora did not have the same opportunity to continued attending school, “As a child Cora had no playtime...In the eighth grade she quit school and went to work with the Studevants” (Hughes 1). Cora did not finish school because she became the economic support for her family. This quote portrays what it is like to not have a good economic status. Hughes shows how if a person was economically stable then they have more opportunities in life, and that includes education. Meanwhile, Cora didn't have a childhood where going to school was a routine because instead she helped her mother with her younger siblings. Since the Jenkins didn't have any inheritance, they were the family who had to work just to keep sustaining themselves.

To many people having a privilege is something that has been normalized and established in society. This means that privileges play an essential part in social classes. However, these advantages and special rights are often available to a certain group. In this case, the Studevants have many privileges in Melton. In a particular scene, Hughes writes about the time Mrs. Art

found out Jessie had a boyfriend and that his father was a Greek man who sold ice-cream. Mrs. Art's motive then became to separate her daughter from her boyfriend. "Indeed his father lost his license, 'due to several complaints by the mothers of children, backed by the Woman's Club,' that he was selling tainted ice-cream. Mrs. Art Studevant had started a campaign to rid the town of objectionable tradespeople and questionable character" (Hughes 5). Mrs. Art thought it was her right to protect and warn the community about the toxic ice-cream being sold. Hughes makes it clear that only the higher status citizens are qualified to give their opinions and make complaints toward others. For that reason, Mrs. Art's plan was a success because Jessie never saw her boyfriend again because his family left town. In contrast in Cora's life, she does not have the privilege to share her opinion because she was not worth hearing. In one scene, Cora was being shut up because she was telling Mrs. Art that Jessie was pregnant. "Scandalization! Oh, my lord! Jessie was in trouble. 'She ain't in trouble neither,' Cora insisted. 'No trouble having a baby you want. I had one.' 'Shut up, Cora!' 'Yes, m'am... But I had one.' 'Hush, I tell you.' 'Yes, m'am.' Then it was that Cora began to be shut out. Jessie was confined to her room" (Hughes 4). Even though Cora was a mother and she had experience with her pregnancy, Mrs. Art thought Cora was not wise. When she spoke her mind the Studevants didn't take her seriously. This implies that people who were considered lower class don't have the freedom of speech because they were being shut down by high status people.

"Cora Unashamed" shows how society tends to demean people but despite the circumstances it is up to the characters to maintain their strength. When Hughes introduced Cora he portrayed how Cora was different from the people in Melton. She was a great example because she was a poor black woman with no opportunities. Cora was usually overpowered by Mr. and Mrs. Studevant, because to them she was an animal. Even though, Pa Jenkins and the

Studevants were from different economic status, they also shared common values such as reputation. However in the end of the story, Cora told the truth about how Jessie was the victim of Mrs. Art because she forced Jessie to get an abortion which led to Jessie's death. With anger, Cora spoke her mind, she was not afraid of Mrs. Art anymore, "Cora never came back to work for the Studevants" (Hughes 6). Cora managed to stay true to herself and did not let them dominate her spirit. Cora remained unashamed.

Works Cited

Hughes, Langston. "Cora Unashamed." Pbs.org. PublicBroadcastingSystem.n.d.

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