

# Celebrating the Strong Woman Character

By Sheryl Row

## Overview

One approach a secondary school instructor might take when studying Langston Hughes' short story "Cora Unashamed" is to focus on the celebration of strong, dignified women, especially lower class women surrounded by a patriarchal middle and upper class. This lesson plan works well as a "through" lesson. Reading Alice Walker's short story "Everyday Use" offers a wonderful "beyond" or extended activity lesson for "Cora Unashamed" by having students compare Cora to Mama in "Everyday Use."

## Objectives

Students will:

- Recognize and identify phrases in "Cora Unashamed" that illustrate Mrs. Art Studevant's bigotry, hypocrisy, and overwhelming concern with social status
- Recognize and identify phrases in "Cora Unashamed" that illustrate Cora's strength, power, dignity, and resilience in the face of adversity
- Analyze the ways that Cora's economic and racial reality separates her from the Studevant's and others like them
- Demonstrate an understanding of Cora's combination of strength and gentleness
- Demonstrate an understanding of Cora's resilience in the face of disappointment and sorrow
- Determine how Hughes describes Cora so that her powerful strength combined with gentleness is believable
- Identify important characteristics in a protagonist, organize these characteristics, and write a character analysis

## Skills Attained

- Small group collaboration
- Close reading skills to find details and incidents in a short story
- Recognition of various methods of character development
- Infer implied meaning by recognizing details that characterize Cora and Mrs. Art Studevant
- Organizing thoughts by writing a comparison/contrast essay
- Application of learning from one task to another

## Lesson Outline

### I. Anticipatory Set Options

**Brainstorming Activity:** Depending on class size, either divide students into small groups to brainstorm and report back to the large group or have the entire class brainstorm all the following or only the first three, the first four, or the first five depending on time and the depth you wish to explore. Because students are asked to think about so many characteristics, consider either putting these questions on the blackboard or a transparency; or creating a chart for the students to use in organizing their thoughts.

- When you think of women who are strong, powerful, and dignified, what noteworthy, public women come to mind? What women in your own life fit that same description?

- What qualities do these women have that make you think of them as strong, powerful, and dignified?
- What qualities do you think make up the ideal woman? What qualities determine an ideal mother or mother figure?
- What is the difference between a "lady" and a "woman"?
- What qualities do society and the media indicate the ideal woman possesses? Give examples from sports, television, the music industry, the national and world stage, etc.
- What are the characteristics of a morally or ethically strong person?

### **Journal Writing Assignment**

This assignment can be used in lieu of the class brainstorming session or as a follow up activity to help each student clarify his or her thinking about strong, powerful, and dignified women.

#### **a. As a replacement for group brainstorming**

1. Homework: Have students brainstorm their individual answers to the questions about strong women. You will want to provide a handout of the questions and/or create a chart for the students to complete.
2. Classwork: For 10 to 15 minutes at the beginning of class, have students brainstorm their answers to the questions about strong women. You will want to provide either a handout or a transparency of the questions. (Great warm up or dispatch at the beginning of class.)

#### **b. As a follow up activity to the group brainstorming**

3. Have students write a brief (one to two double spaced pages) character sketch of a powerful woman in their own lives or in the public sphere. They should supply at least three examples illustrating why they believe this woman is powerful.
4. Have students defend in a brief paragraph the qualities they believe the ideal woman and/or mother figure should possess.
5. Have students defend in a brief paragraph the qualities they believe that a morally or ethically strong person possesses.

### **Class Discussion**

After students have brainstormed answers to the questions, take a few minutes to share with the group at large the answers to the questions. Ask the students to try to reach some consensus for the qualities of a powerful woman, the ideal woman/mother figure, and a moral or ethically strong person. It is not important for every student to agree with the findings. In fact, it probably will not be possible. The importance of this task is to get students thinking about these issues and to begin clarifying their own thoughts.

## **II. Reading Activities**

6. Have students complete a "close reading" of "Cora Unashamed" by highlighting the following:
  7. In yellow: description of Cora (physical, emotional, socio-economic situation, etc.)
  8. In blue: description of Mrs. Art Studevont
  9. In green: description of Jessie
  10. In pink: description of the setting (Melton, nature, the Studevont house)
  11. In orange: description of Cora's family
12. Have students annotate the text in the margins of the story or on separate paper. The annotations should consist of:

- a. Questions the students have about plot, character, or thematic development; questions about the purpose or symbolism of the setting; identification of conflict and its resolution (or not)
  - b. Connections the students are making and conclusions the students are drawing while reading (about plot, theme, character, point of view, setting, tone, conflict, style)
13. Have students do the same thing for "Everyday Use." Substitute the following highlighting instructions:

In yellow: description of Mama (physical, emotional, socio-economic situation, etc.)  
 In blue: description of Maggie  
 In green: description of Dee  
 In pink: description of the setting (the house and yard)  
 In orange: description of items Dee wants to have  
 In blue ink: Underline references to the relationship between Dee and Mama and Dee and Maggie  
 In red ink: Underline references to the relationship between Mama and Maggie

### III. Post-reading Activities

Have students complete the character analysis worksheets for "Cora Unashamed" and "Everyday Use":

- n. Character Analysis Worksheet for "Cora Unashamed"
- o. Character Analysis Worksheet: Conclusions for "Cora Unashamed"
- p. Character Analysis Worksheet for "Everyday Use"
- q. Character Analysis Worksheet: Conclusions for "Everyday Use"

Students can share their responses and/or use the information later in an essay.

**Essay Topic:** The Athenian historian Thucydides (c. 460-400 B.C.E.) said, "The secret of happiness is freedom, and the secret of freedom, courage." Write a contrast essay examining how Thucydides' notions of happiness, freedom and courage apply to Cora and Mrs. Art Studevant.

**Essay Topic:** Compare and contrast the motivations behind Cora and Mama's actions. How are they similar? How are they different? How does their reality factor in their decisions?

### Assessment

For assessing student performance on this lesson, use either the lesson worksheets as graded activities or have students write formal compare/contrast essays, based on the suggested topics listed above.

### Related Works

The theme of strength and/or the healing power of women may be explored through these other literary works:

- o Isabel Allende – Clara, Alba, and the Mora Sisters in **The House of the Spirits**; also in the "Epilogue" the description of the native woman who aids Alba's return home from the prison camp is a wonderful piece to use to celebrate the power of the common woman.
- o Rudolfo Anaya – Ultima in **Bless Me, Ultima**
- o Sandra Cisneros – Esperanza in **The House on Mango Street**

- Zora Neale Hurston – Janie Mae Crawford in **Their Eyes Were Watching God**
- Toni Morrison – Pilate in **Song of Solomon**
- Amy Tan – any of the mother/daughter relationships in **The Joy Luck Club**
- Alice Walker – Celie in **The Color Purple**
- August Wilson – Rose in **Fences**

## Interdisciplinary Links

Studying Hughes' celebration of the common folk in "Cora Unashamed" offers an excellent opportunity to explore the celebration of the common folk in fine art. Folk art lends itself well to this discussion, but several trained artists also work well. Linking real themes of the times to the stories give students the visual connection that they may need. Some artists to consider are listed below.

### Folk Artists

Folk art is self-taught art by the folk, the common people. Most folk artists use whatever materials they find, perhaps using common house paint or colored markers on cardboard, milk jugs, lumber scraps, or driftwood. Common subjects range from the whimsically abstract to primitive depictions of everyday life. The African American Museum in Dallas, Texas, has one of the country's most extensive collections of folk art as well as an excellent research library.

Both Clementine Hunter and Ellis Ruley are self taught artists who painted with whatever materials they had available. Both also painted scenes they witnessed as they went about their daily lives. Samples of both artists' work can be found on the Internet.

26. **Clementine Hunter** (1886?–1988) was born in late December of 1886 or early January of 1887 on the Hidden Hill cotton plantation near Cloutierville, Louisiana. Her family eventually moved to the Melrose Plantation where Hunter worked in the fields as a young girl and later worked in the house as a maid and cook. At the age of 54 Hunter borrowed some paints from a visiting artist and "marked" her first picture. Through the help of patrons, Hunter was able to continue painting, sometimes after putting in a full day of work. Her titles often suggest the subjects of her paintings: "Saturday Night at the Honky Tonk," "Cane River Fish Fry," and "Fixing Hair and Drinking Coffee."
27. **Ellis Ruley** (1882–1959) was born in Norwich, Connecticut. Most of his life was spent as a laborer in construction and coal mines. Ruley began painting at age 57 using house paint. Although Ruley was unappreciated in his lifetime and many of his paintings were destroyed by fire shortly after his death, his work has received recent interest.

### Trained Artists

Many trained artists have celebrated the common folk in their art. Two examples of non-African American artists are Francisco Zuniga and Amado Pena. The Internet offers a wealth of material on various artists.

28. **Francisco Zuniga** was born in Costa Rica in 1912. By 1938 Zuniga was a well-known sculptor. Zuniga presents an interesting comparison to Hughes in that he sees ancient pre-Hispanic cultures as surviving colonization through their still existing sculpture. He prefers to sculpt women and depicts his reverence for them by focusing on the Indian woman as the eternal earth mother: healer, child bearer, comforter. His pieces play up the prominent breasts, rounded hips, and undulating abdomens of his subjects.

29. **Amado Pena** was born in Laredo, Texas, in 1943 of Chicano and Yaqui Indian heritage. He sees his art as a means to deliver social commentary especially about family, love, solitude, and pain. His works often depict women in daily acts like baking bread or crooning to babies. Like Zuniga, Pena's reverence for women as mother, healer, comforter is obvious in his works.

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There are four worksheets needed for this lesson. Click the links below to view and print them individually.

[Character Analysis Worksheet for "Cora Unashamed"](#)

[Character Analysis Worksheet: Conclusions for "Cora Unashamed"](#)

[Character Analysis Worksheet for "Everyday Use"](#)

[Character Analysis Worksheet: Conclusions for "Everyday Use"](#)

# Character Analysis Worksheet

Print this file using the File/Print menu item.

Find textual examples for each of the following ways an author creates a character. A sample is provided for each method. Try to find at least five and hopefully more examples for each method.

## **Cora's Physical Description and/or Circumstances:**

Example: ". . . —Cora with the scent of the Studevants' supper about her, and a cheap perfume."

## **Cora's Actions:**

Example: "Cora was the oldest of a family of eight children . . . Cora simply couldn't go, with nobody else to help take care of Ma."

## **Cora's Words and Thoughts:**

Example: "She ain't in trouble neither . . . No trouble having a baby you want. I had one."

## **What Other Characters Say or Think about Cora:**

**(Because the story has little dialogue, you may include what the omniscient narrator reports other characters saying or thinking about Cora)**

Example: "She was what the people referred to . . . to be polite, as a Negress, . . . to be rude, as a nigger—sometimes adding the word 'wench' for no good reason."

## **What the narrator (or author) Says About Cora:**

Example: "She worked for the Studevants, who treated her like a dog."

# Character Analysis Worksheet: Conclusions

Print this file using the File/Print menu item.

Provide at least three key textual quotations to support each of your answers. For each answer try to choose examples from the beginning, the middle, and the end of the text.

1. What is Cora's economic reality?

a.

b.

c.

d.

2. How does she respond to this economic reality?

a.

b.

c.

d.

3. What is Cora's social status?

a.

b.

c.

d.

4. How does she respond to this reality?

a.

b.

c.

d.

5. What are Cora's values? What are her beliefs? What things are most important to her?

a.

b.

c.

d.

6. How does Cora respond to adversity, to situations that would cause difficulty for many people? (Both her own and others.)

a.

b.

c.

d.

7. What do Cora's responses to adversity tell you about her?

a.

b.

c.

d.

8. What is the significance of this story's title? How does it foreshadow Cora's actions?

a.

b.

c.

d.

9. Is Cora a believable character? Why or why not? What about her does or does not ring true?

a.

b.

c.

d.

# Character Analysis Worksheet for "Everyday Use"

Print this file using the File/Print menu item.

Find textual examples for each of the following ways an author creates a character. A sample is provided for each method. Try to find at least five and hopefully more examples for each method.

## **Mama's Physical Description:**

Example: ". . . a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands . . . "

## **Mama's Actions:**

Example: "I will wait for her in the yard . . . anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree and wait for the breezes . . . "

## **Mama's Words and Thoughts:**

Example: "On TV mother and child embrace and smile into each other's faces . . . the child . . . tell[s] how she would not have made it without their help."

## **What Other Character's Say or Think about Mama:**

**(Because this story is told in first person, you will find little direct dialogue and no examples of what other characters are thinking. Instead, intuit what you believe Maggie, Dee, and Asalamalakim think about Mama. Base your opinions on textual evidence.)**

Example: Dee is aware, perhaps painfully, that Mama is larger than probably most of the women Dee spends time with – "'Don't get up,' says Dee. Since I am stout . . . "

## **What the narrator (or author) says about Mama:**

**(Because this story is told in first person, you will not find examples of what a third person narrator says about Mama. Instead, add any other relevant information that helps develop Mama's character.)**

# Character Analysis Worksheet: Conclusions for "Everyday Use"

Print this file using the File/Print menu item.

Provide at least three key textual quotations to support each of your answers. For each answer try to choose examples from the beginning, the middle, and the end of the text.

1. What is Mama's economic reality?

a.

b.

c.

d.

2. How does she respond to this economic reality?

a.

b.

c.

d.

3. Describe Mama's relationship with Maggie.

a.

b.

c.

d.

4. Describe Mama's relationship with Dee.

a.

b.

c.

d.

5. What are Mama's values? What are her beliefs? What things are most important to her?

a.

b.

c.

d.

6. How does Mama respond to adversity, to situations that would cause difficulty for many people?  
(Both her own and others.)

a.

b.

c.

d.

7. What do Mama's responses to adversity tell you about her?

a.

b.

c.

d.

8. What is the significance of this story's title? How does it foreshadow Mama's actions?

a.

b.

c.

d.

9. Is Mama a believable character? Why or why not? What about her does or does not ring true?

a.

b.

c.

d.