

Study Guide for "Cora Unashamed"

A Provocative Story by Langston Hughes

Beginning this month, **ExxonMobil MASTERPIECE THEATRE**, television's most distinguished and long-running dramatic series, will offer occasional adaptations of American literary works under the title of the **AMERICAN COLLECTION**. Langston Hughes' **Cora Unashamed** inaugurates the nine-film series, dedicated to the works of American writers. **Cora Unashamed** will air on October 25, 2000 on PBS, starring Regina Taylor as Cora, and Cherry Jones as Mrs. Studevant. Emmy award winning screenwriter Anne Peacock transformed Hughes' story of unconditional love for the screen. Deborah Pratt directed this ALT Films production, which was executive-produced by Marian Rees, Anne Hopkins, and Stephen Kulczycki. Please check your local listings for the exact day and time in your area.

The ncteamericancollection.org Web site, generously funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, contains a broad selection of teacher-developed resources about Hughes and **Cora Unashamed**, as well as lesson plans that link the story to the film and to works that you may already be teaching. This teacher's guide provides suggestions to help you incorporate several of the best of our resources into for a comprehensive unit. Please know that what we've compiled here represents only a sampling of the wealth of materials offered on the site -- and we invite you to browse the site and develop your own approach if none of ours suits your needs.

Synopsis

In this short, but powerful story, author Langston Hughes, the poet laureate of the Harlem Renaissance, expands on themes of racism and transcendence that permeate his poetry. Set in Melton, Iowa, in 1921, the story centers on Cora Jenkins, a member of the only black family in this mid-western town. Her "natural" place in this community is that of maid to the Studevant family, one of the more prominent families in Melton. While the tale focuses on Cora's current involvement with this family and their treatment of their daughter Jessie, Cora's past personal tragedies and her love for Jessie give her the strength to stand tall, find her own voice, and transcend the confines of her situation. The [e-text of Cora Unashamed](#) is available for free download on the site and provides a good starting point for students. Coupling the story with the **Study Questions** will prime students for good class discussion on the plot.

Pre-set or Introduction

If you like to begin with a look at the author's life and works, this site has excellent sources available for you. The first is an [Introductory Essay](#) on Hughes' life and works, including **Cora Unashamed**.

The second resource area dealing with Hughes can be found through the Hughes Author Links on the [American Writing Gateway](#), a portal for external web sites on authors that have been evaluated by teachers across the country for teacher resource value.

A lesson on [Examining Language in Cora Unashamed](#) is a great "Into" lesson that talks about denotation and connotation. This lesson addresses the need for close text reading in finding the meaning behind the words.

Lesson Suggestions

Production Information

There are many ways to approach the story and the movie, and just a few of those resources available on the site are listed here. But whatever you decide to do, please take advantage of our very unique interviews with the creative artists behind the film. Teachers were given the opportunity to come up with the questions about the movie process and this work in particular that would have the most value to their teaching, and submit them to ask the producers, director, screenwriter, and stars. Some students also submitted questions after having read the story and watched an advance copy of the video. Representative student response can be found in **Breaking Free**, the October issue of the student online magazine

[Between the Lines](#). The theme and many of the selections for the issue deal directly or indirectly with **Cora Unashamed**. Following the airing of the show, **any students who would like to submit a review of the film are welcome to do so**. Just submit the "join us" form on the student magazine.

For some beautiful stills from the movie, please visit our extended [Image Gallery for Cora Unashamed](#).

Full Unit of Study

For a cohesive unit, [Into, Through and Beyond "Cora Unashamed"](#) is a step-by-step guide that takes you into, through the work and beyond it, culminating in a comparative analysis with Hughes' poem, "I, too." Other suggestions for writing are also offered.

Links to Core Literature

Teachers have compared the characters, themes within Cora Unashamed to works that are already heavily taught in schools. For example, in [Celebrating the Strong Woman Character](#), Cora is compared to the mother in Alice Walker's heavily anthologized short story, "Everyday Use." In the lesson called [Author's Purpose and Tone Of Voice](#), excerpts from both **Cora Unashamed** and Eudora Welty's "The Ponder Heart" are used to distinguish different tones in writing. In the [Point of View](#) lesson, the teacher gives several suggestions for links to other commonly taught works that would be good for studying point of view such as "A Rose for Emily" by William Faulkner.

Theme Related Lessons

Topics such as racism and teen pregnancy are found in **Cora Unashamed**. Teachers have offered several ways to broach these sensitive topics in the class. There are several essays, writing prompts and class discussion topics offered on the [Teacher's Resources page for Cora Unashamed](#).

Debate

[Debating Cora Unashamed](#) not only gives suggested topics specifically designed for Cora, but also gives guidelines for the format and execution of the debate process.

Writing Workshop

This is an excellent [workshop](#) for the serious student of literature and writing who would enjoy sharing and listening to critiques of his personal writings.

Extension Activities and Resources

Strong characters who speak out the truth serve as role models for us all. Comparing Cora's funeral speech to the speeches of other passionate advocates such as Malcolm X, Mario Savio, and Sojourner Truth allows students the opportunity to experience and analyze great motivational speeches and to speak out on issues of concern to them. See both the essay, [Uninvited Speakers](#), and the accompanying lesson that deals specifically with the [speech of Sojourner Truth](#).

Across the Curriculum

A discussion of Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance would be lacking if the subject of music were not addressed. [Bessie Smith: A Spark for Langston Hughes, a Heroine for Cora](#) is an insightful essay about one of the foremost ladies of the blues, and comes with activity and lesson suggestions at the end.

This guide was created by Ann Gann and Kathy Honda Stein, English teachers in Tennessee and California, respectively.