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# Jesse B. Semple and the black press : the voice of black people

Mary A. Massey

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## ABSTRACT

### Jesse B. Semple and The Black Press: The Voice of Black People

Mary Ann Massey

Master of Arts, University of Richmond, 1993

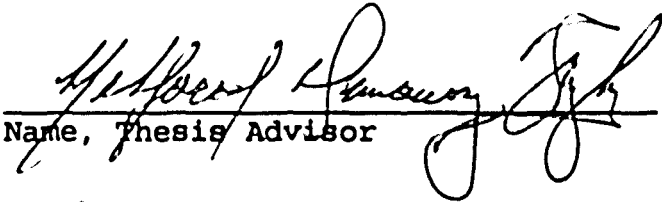
Professor Welford Dunaway Taylor, thesis advisor

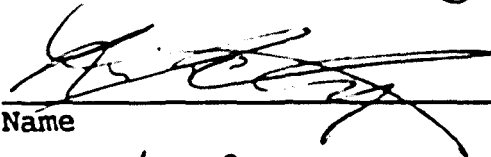
Black newspapers play a vital role in keeping people up-to-date with what's happening in the Black community. This study will show how Black newspapers play a vital role in reporting news and comments from an Afro-American perspective. It will provide a historical overview of Black news as well as a close examination of Langston Hughes' columns and his character of Jesse B. Semple within the context of the Black press, particularly the Chicago Defender.

The results of this study will reveal the joys and concerns that Afro-Americans shared with each other through the Black newspapers and show how the character of "Jesse B. Semple" emerged from the Black newspaper to become an important literary character and a truly authentic voice for Black people.

Approval Page

I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

  
Name, Thesis Advisor

  
Name



Jesse B. Semple and The Black Press: The Voice of Black  
People

by

Mary Ann Massey

B.A., Cornell University, 1983

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the University of Richmond

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for the degree of

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in

English

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

My study of the role of Black newspapers in expressing the joys and concerns of Afro-Americans has shown me another way the lives of Black people have been written down and preserved. This study has also given me a chance to explore another side of my favorite writer, Langston Hughes. I am familiar with Langston Hughes as an American author and poet. Now I have had a chance to see him as a journalist, a role which very little has been written about. This study has given me a deeper appreciation for Langston Hughes, Black newspapers and most of all Black people.

I wish to thank my thesis advisors, Professor Welford D. Taylor and Professor Daryl C. Dance, for their time and effort in this project. I would also like to thank Professor Taylor for teaching a course in American Humor and writing The Newsprint Mask which gave me the idea for this thesis. I also wish to express my gratitude to the staff at Boatwright Library, particularly the Inter-library loan department, for their assistance in this project.

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## Introduction

"Ah yes, a newspaper, one of the most vital means of keeping up-to-date with what's happening in today's world. I can recall that the playwright Arthur Miller once said, 'A good newspaper is a nation talking to itself' (The Voice 12). Indeed, newspapers play a crucial role in shaping public opinion by reporting on controversial issues and providing a voice for the silent oppressed. One kind of newspaper dedicated to shaping public opinion, by expressing the problems and concerns of the silent oppressed, is the Black newspaper. It is the Black newspaper that gives Afro-Americans a chance to tell their side of the news page by page, column by column.

The Black newspaper also provides a excellent opportunity for famous literary writers to share their thoughts and comments about current events with the general public. It is particularly interesting to see the contrast in the way the newspaper reports the news according to fact and the way a literary writer will comment upon the news by creating a fictional character. This contrast is clearly seen in Langston Hughes' "Here to Yonder" columns, particularly his "Simple" columns, which he wrote for the Chicago Defender, during the years 1942-1949. Although Langston Hughes wrote a number of "Here to Yonder" columns

for the Chicago Defender during those years, perhaps the ones that are the most memorable and treasurable are those in which the character of Jesse B. Semple appears.

This paper will examine the vital role Black Newspapers play in helping Afro-Americans "talk to the nation." It will also provide a close examination of the Chicago Defender and Hughes' "Here to Yonder" columns, paying particularly close attention to those that feature Jesse B. Semple, in order to reveal how the news can be more enjoyable from a literary point of view.

The first chapter will be divided into two parts. The first part will provide a historical overview of Black news beginning with the first Black newspaper and ending with the vital role of Black newspapers during World War II. This general overview will provide an historical setting for the Chicago Defender and Langston Hughes' "Here to Yonder" columns as well as reveal how Black newspapers addressed the political, social and cultural concerns of Black people.

The second part of this chapter will focus on the Chicago Defender during the years 1942-1949 since that is the time Langston Hughes' columns appeared there. This section will provide a detailed look at how the war, the presidential election, and other social events affected Black people during this time and how the Chicago Defender addressed them. This section will also provide an overall



view of the structure and publication of the Chicago Defender.

The second chapter will provide an overall analysis of Langston Hughes' "Here to Yonder" columns, noting how his different styles and topics serve to advance the Chicago Defender's primary purpose in providing a voice for the problems and concerns of Afro-American people.

The final chapter will provide an close examination of the "Simple" columns noting Hughes' fictional techniques and his use of the character of Jesse B. Semple to complement the Chicago Defender's news thus making it more enjoyable to read. This chapter will also explore the unique relationship between Hughes and his character, Jesse B Semple, and provide a close analysis of Simple's character, noting his development from a "Simple-Minded Friend" into a truly authentic voice for America's Black people.

So sit back, relax and enjoy this special edition of 'Jesse B. Semple and The Black Press: The Voice of Black People.' "

## Chapter I: Black Newspapers and the Chicago Defender

### Part I: History of Black Newspapers

Frank L. Stanley, editor of the Louisville Defender, best sums up the function of the Black newspaper when he states:

The chief function first is to objectively report the news, as and when it happens, and as it affects all people, without any special regard to race, color or creed. The second function...is to fight oppression, and to give expression to the desires of those citizens of minority groups, in these United States, who seek full citizenship rights. (Guzman 383)

From its inception, Black newspapers have been dedicated to performing the dual function of reporting the news while fighting the blatant oppression of Black people in the United States. This is clearly evident in the first newspaper published by Blacks in the United States, called Freedom's Journal. This New York newspaper appeared weekly between March 16, 1827 and March 28, 1829. It was edited by the Reverend Samuel Cornish, a Presbyterian minister, and John Russwurm, one of the first Blacks to graduate from a college in the United States.

According to these two editors, the primary focus of the Freedom's Journal was to provide a forum for the "black man to begin speaking out for himself" (Jacobs 3).

We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the publick

been deceived by misrepresentations...The civil rights of a people being of the greatest value, it shall ever be our duty to vindicate our brethren, when oppressed; and to lay the case before the publick...Our vices and our degradation are ever arrayed against us, but our virtues are passed by unnoticed. (Jacobs 3)

One of the primary issues that the Freedom's Journal addressed "was freedom for slaves, and it went so far as to call upon the slaves of the South to revolt" (Guzman 384).

Although slavery was a primary issue for the Freedom's Journal, this newspaper dealt with other concerns. One such concern involved the colonization of Liberia by Black people. It was the Freedom's Journal which carried the views of the proponents who supported the idea of Liberia as a "missionary colony and home for emancipated slaves" (Jacobs 187), as well as the views of those who were opposed to Liberia as an asylum for free Blacks. By the end of 1828, John Russwurm "had turned the Freedom's Journal into a pro-colonization newspaper" (Jacobs 4).

However, this first Black newspaper not only carried the political issues of the Black community but the social and cultural ones as well. The Freedom's Journal contained columns such as Mr. Abernathy's, which described hair dressing techniques, and others that contained animal stories and commentaries on a wide variety of subjects. The Freedom's Journal also contained a section pertaining to advertisements and notices as well as one for readers'

comments.

The Freedom's Journal started experiencing difficulties a few months after it had begun publication with the resignation of Samuel Cornish. John Russwurm's decision to leave the United States for Liberia caused the paper to cease publication late the following March. The Freedom's Journal survived for two years "as a medium in which the problems and concerns of the nations's free black community could be expressed" (Jacobs 4).

After the end of the Freedom's Journal and up "until the end of the Civil war, black newspapers were published exclusively in Northern communities, where Blacks were literate and had the freedom to publish" (Suggs 3). Most of these Black newspapers were published in New York City while others were published in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Boston, Cleveland and San Francisco.

After slavery ended, and during the time of Reconstruction, Black newspapers concentrated on the "necessity of combating growing anti-Negro sentiment and of unifying Negroes to cope with it" (Guzman 384). One of the earliest Black newspapers started in the South to meet this challenge was called the Colored American. It was started at Augusta, Georgia in 1865. The Colored American was noted as:

a vehicle for the diffusion of religious,

political, and general intelligence.... [A means] to keep before the minds of our race, the duties and responsibilities of freedom; and to call attention to the wants and grievances of the colored people. (Guzman 384)

In spite of its noble purpose the Colored American lasted only six months. Even though the early Black newspapers did not last long, they continued to develop and grow after emancipation. "In 1870, there were 10 Negro [newspapers], in 1880, 31; in 1890 there were 154" (Guzman 385). The rapid increase in Black newspapers served to emphasize that:

the importance of the Negro Press for the formation of Negro opinion, for the function of all other Negro institutions, for Negro leadership and concerted action generally, is enormous. The Negro press is an educational agency and a power agency discussing crucial issues which affect the Black community." (Oak 30)

By the turn of the century, there were many notable Black newspapers playing a vital role in shaping and expressing the issues and concerns of the Black community. One of these was the New York Amsterdam News, a weekly, started in 1909 by James H. Anderson. This newspaper originally emphasized local news by focusing "mainly [on] the conventional Harlemites or residents of some other black colony within New York City" (Wolsley 76). This newspaper reports news about New York city residents that is unavailable elsewhere. Today, the Amsterdam News not only

covers Harlem, but also contains a lot of news coverage on Brooklyn, another "black colony within New York City" (Wolsley 76). In fact, the Amsterdam News has a "Brooklyn section with its own flag reading Brooklyn Amsterdam News" (Wolsley 76).

Despite the Amsterdam News' heavy coverage of local New York City news, there is still ample room for columnists, a sports section and a section on women's interests. However, it should be noted that during the 1940's, the Amsterdam News was considered "a sensational paper, printing much gossip and scandal" (Wolsley 76). Even Langston Hughes admitted that if he was "marooned on a desert island it would be doubly bad if [he] couldn't go down to the corner and pick up the Amsterdam News and see who killed who in Harlem [that] week [or] who is being divorced and why." (CD, June 26, 1948, 14) Although the Amsterdam News was considered a *sensational paper* during the 1940's, there were still many Black newspapers during that time that carried national as well as local news about Afro-Americans which was both reliable and informative. One of these newspapers was called the Chicago Defender.

## Part II: The Chicago Defender

The Chicago Defender was started by Robert S. Abbott in 1905, in Bronzeville, Chicago. "It was the beginning of a new type of journalism among Negroes. It [would grow] from a few copies of handbill size, which Robert S. Abbott the editor himself distributed, into a great metropolitan institution" (Guzman 385).

After the death of John S. Abbott in 1940, the Chicago Defender continued to thrive on its reputation as "a great metropolitan institution" under the management of Abbott's nephew, John H. Sengstacke. At the start of World War II, "some 40,000 people in Bronzeville, Chicago brought the paper every Saturday for a dime a copy" (Drake 400). By September 1947, the Chicago Defender had a "national circulation of 131,600 [which] means that over two-thirds of its circulation was national. Over sixty-six percent of this national circulation was in the south" (Oak 70).

The appreciation for the service and publication of the Chicago Defender is shown by the readers' letters. One reader wrote :

Dear Editor:

I enjoy reading your paper for several reasons. First you give news and one can rely upon the facts in any case. I also love to read your interesting fiction and features. I trust that you will continue to have such inspiring editorials as you have in the past. I am an

ardent supporter of this great race institution,  
the Chicago Defender. (CD, Nov. 21, 1942, 14)

This letter shows the diversity of the Chicago Defender during World War II in that it included news, fiction, and editorials, even though it was reduced from forty to twenty-six pages due to war time restrictions.

Most of the news reported by the Chicago Defender during the 1940's dealt with World War II. Although World War II affected all Americans, it was a particular dilemma for Afro-Americans. World War II raised the crucial issue of whether Afro-Americans should fight and die to end Nazism in Europe while Jim Crowism was being practiced at home. Therefore, it became the task of Black newspapers, such as the Chicago Defender, to address both concerns--the war against Nazism in Europe and the war against racial discrimination at home:

With the outbreak of World War II, the Negro press emerged as one of the most powerful forces among Negroes in America. These weekly papers became the "racial watch dogs...[and] their editors began a campaign for complete integration of Negroes into all war-related activities....The newspapers advised Negroes to support the war, commended the partial relaxation of discriminating barriers here and there [and] defined the primary function of the press as one of pressure and meddling.... Most Negro papers continued to follow the policy dubbed "Double V" - a fight for the victory of democracy at home as well as abroad. (Drake 402)

The fight against discrimination at home and abroad was clearly waged on the front pages and in the editorial



section of the Chicago Defender. This is evident from the following sample front page "copy of the Chicago Defender with excerpts from the editorial page superimposed upon it."

(Drake, 405)

Figure 1.



According to figure 1: On New Year's Day, 1944, The Defender brought in the New Year with the announcement: 14 CHICAGO SOLDIERS WOUNDED. This announcement brought home

the full force of the war to Afro-Americans. Also in figure 1, prominently displayed within a box, is the "The Chicago Defender Honor Roll of 1943" which paid homage to "22 persons-Negro and White-honest and fearless who have battled against the barriers of race prejudice to see that this great nation of ours truly represents the land of opportunity for Negroes as well as others." (CD, Jan. 1, 1944, 1) Glancing at the bottom of figure 1, one can see the hopeful announcement:

GEORGIA CHAIN GANGS TO VANISH WITH THE NEW YEAR, and the depressing news that the Texas state's attorney DEFENDS RIGHT OF TEXAS PRIMARY TO BAR NEGROES. A small item sandwiched in between announced that TEXANS PLANNED TO JIM CROW MERCHANT MARINES at a United Seamen's Service Club....

A victory on the home front is recorded: MAYOR NAMES MOLLISON [a Negro] TO SCHOOL BOARD POST. A fight in progress is headlined: SENGSTACKE SPURS FIGHT FOR PLAYERS IN BIG LEAGUES. The latter article called upon "Negro publishers throughout the nation to follow up with their local organized baseball club managers in seeing that the practice of excluding Negroes from organized baseball is discontinued."

(CD, Jan. 1, 1944: 1, 14)

As one can see, the Chicago Defender not only fought discrimination on its front pages but also in its editorial section. In the editorial section one can see how both civilians and soldiers felt about the war and the Defender. William L Hunter, from Seattle, Washington wrote:

I am pleased with the manner in which you are carrying the fight for the race. I read your paper whenever I can find one....

I read your paper and I saw where the

Secretary of the U.S. Navy was stating that he did not intend to have mixed crews on America's warships. I wrote him a letter tonight stating [that] this was an un-American attitude toward the colored boys of America, and if it does not change, America will never be free.

(CD, Jan. 1, 1944, 14)

The following letter shows that the Defender not only reported news about Afro-American soldiers, but also sent gifts to these soldiers. This letter was written by Private First Class Shevlin P. Avery, stationed at Ft. McClellan, Ala.:

I am writing these few lines to thank you very kindly for the cigarettes that were sent by your paper to the soldiers of Fort McClellan. They were distributed by U.S.O. and were well appreciated by most of the Fort McClellan personnel. (CD, May 27, 1943, 14)

Although the Defender gave extensive front page coverage to the war efforts, it also covered national news such as the Roosevelt presidential elections. This is evident in Figure 2: "part of a front page facsimile of the Defender for the week of November 18, 1944" (Drake 406).

Figure 2.



The Defender, as a firm advocate of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal Program, helped to galvanize the Black vote during the 1944 Presidential elections with its headlines and front page coverage of the elections, as seen in figure 2. It is interesting to note that, according to figure 2, this edition of the Defender also gives a detailed account of "HOW THE NEGRO VOTE WENT FOR ROOSEVELT IN THE BIG CITIES" along with a full page account of election returns on page three.

It should be noted that the popularity of President Roosevelt is shown by the fact that "he performed the miracle of transforming a large proportion of Negro voters from staunch Republicans [due to Abraham Lincoln] to zealous supporters of the Democratic ticket" (Drake 353). Although Franklin D. Roosevelt died in office on April 12, 1945, less than a year after beginning his fourth term, most Black people still remain loyal to the Democratic party.

Even though the Defender gave ample coverage to the war, politics and other local and national news, it still contained a diversity of other subjects within its twenty-six "war-time" pages. Usually the sports section followed the local and national news where the names of famous black athletes appeared, such as Jackie Robinson and Joe Louis. Comic strips usually followed the sports section. A glance at one of the later comic strips, entitled "Mr. Jim Crow," shows how the Defender utilized humor to fight racism and

segregation in the United States. Following the sports section and comic strips was the editorial page. From just glancing at the editorial section, one can clearly see how much the Defender was dedicated to fighting discrimination and uplifting the race. At the top of the editorial page, in the right hand corner, was printed its slogan: "EQUALITY TO ALL!" At the top left was printed the Defender's purpose: "SERVICE-JUSTICE." In the middle, between the Defender's slogan and its purpose appeared the words of Frederick Douglas, "I know of no rights superior to the rights of humanity."

The editorial page is filled with a diversity of well known columnists such as Harold Meece, who writes about Southern thought and culture, and Walter White, whose column contained comments on international people, places and events. There was also a column which dealt with health issues by Dr. U. G. Dailey. Two more well-known leading Afro-American writers joined the Defender columnists during the years 1941-1949. One was William E. B. DuBois, who joined on January 6, 1945, with his column, "The Winds of Time." The other prolific writer was Langston Hughes, who joined on Nov. 21, 1942 with his column, "Here to Yonder."

Yet it should be noted that the Chicago Defender was not the first nor was it the only newspaper that Langston Hughes wrote for. It was, however, the first newspaper to

which Hughes contributed a regular weekly column. The first time Hughes started writing for a newspaper was as a sophomore at Central High School in Cleveland, Ohio . In 1918, he "published his first pieces of verse in the Central High Monthly, the expertly produced school [newspaper]. In the fall of 1918, Hughes joined the editorial staff of the Monthly" (Rampersad 1:27) where he published a number of poems and short stories.

By January 1919 [the] Monthly was virtually a Langston Hughes number. In addition to two poems and a lengthy short story, he became editor-in-chief of the prestigious 'Belfry Owl', an autonomous section of the Monthly that commented satirically on life at Central. (Rampersad 1:28)

After high school Hughes continued publishing poems and short stories in a number of magazines and newspapers across the country. In fact, after Hughes had been writing as a journalist for over 20 years,

the editors of the New York Amsterdam News and the Chicago Defender invited him to write a weekly column for their papers. At the Defender [Hughes'] friend, Metz T. P. Lochard,...made the better offer: a column of a thousand words expected each Thursday...at fifteen cents per column, dealing with 'specific incidents and stories rather than abstract generalizations.' The [Chicago Defender] would also take care of all correspondence involving the column. On October 29, [1942, Hughes] wired his acceptance.  
(Rampersad 2:53)

Thus, on Nov 21, 1942, Hughes joined the distinguished staff of columnists at the Defender with his first "Here to Yonder" column. Along with Langston Hughes and the other

leading columnists, the editorial page also contained a section entitled "What the People Say," which provided room for readers' poems, letters, and comments. Also, at the top and bottom of the editorial page was a political cartoon.

The section entitled "Mostly About Women" contained information about weddings, graduations, and women who received honors and awards. Following this was the entertainment section which contained the latest news on the "debut of Marva (Joe Louis' wife) as a night-club singer, the price of liquor [or] of a cab ride, along with the gossip and scandals involving local and Hollywood Afro-American actors" (Drake 410). The final section of the Defender contained club news, church news, and movie ads.

In 1956, John H. Sengstacke made the Chicago Defender into a daily newspaper and changed its name to the Daily Defender. Even today the Daily Defender continues the great tradition of reporting the news while championing and defending the rights and concerns of Afro-Americans at home and abroad.

However, in the 1940's, during those uncertain days of war and political unrest, the Chicago Defender proved to be a vital network of information helping Afro-Americans keep in touch from "here to yonder." One of the leading columnists for the Defender, who used his column to strengthen the link between Afro-Americans from "here to

yonder," was Langston Hughes.



## Chapter II: Langston Hughes' "Here To Yonder" Columns

Langston Hughes once wrote that the "Negro press" was his favorite reading "because it kept him in touch with the real world of Black people" (CD, June 19, 1948, 14).

According to Hughes:

In my time I have been all around the world and I assure you there is nothing else in the world like the Negro press. It is unique, intriguing, exciting, exalting, low-down, and terrific. It is also tragic and terrible, brave and pathetic, funny and full of tears. It's me and my papa and mama and Truman K. Gibson and A. Philip Randolph and Hazel Scott and Rosa Lee Ingram and other folks who are no blood relations of mine, but are brothers and sisters in skin.

(CD, June 19, 1948, 14)

All of Langston Hughes' "Here To Yonder" columns, especially the ones in which the character Jesse B. Semple appears, served to enrich the "Negro press" making it a favorite reading for many people.

Hughes' first "Here To Yonder" column is worthy of close scrutiny since it serves as a wonderful introduction and gives an overall view of what Hughes will focus on in his columns. This column also give the reader a taste of Hughes' talent for combining fact with fiction.

The column opens with an explanation of how Afro-Americans in the United States are affected by the war over in Europe:

Things that happen away off yonder affect us here. The bombs that fall on some far-off Second Front in Asia rattle the dishes on your table in Chicago or New Orleans, cut down on your sugar, coffee, meat ration, and take the tires off your car. Right now Hitler is about to freeze your salary or your work, although his activities at the moment are centered around Stalingrad. But it is not so far from here to yonder....

What happened that summer at Munich, in Paris, in the betrayal of Spain, and later at the Maginot Line-way over yonder-will make YOU cry right here, for some of the men we know, our relatives, friends, and fellow citizens, Negroes from Harlem and Chicago and Mississippi-some of those men will never come home again. Some will die way over yonder in Europe, in Asia and Africa-thus forcefully and directly does the yonder reach into the here. It touches you. It touches me. (CD, Nov. 21, 1942, 14)

As one can see from these opening lines, Hughes' first column focuses primarily on how World War II, which was taking place over "Yonder" in Europe affects Afro-Americans living "Here" in the United States. Since many of Hughes' columns focused on World War II, they served to complement the Defender's extensive coverage of the war on its front pages and in its editorial section. However, just as in this first column, as well as in subsequent ones, Langston Hughes makes the war appear more personal than the Defender by noting how it touched the readers and how it touched him.

Hughes was personally affected by World War II when in late October, 1942, he received a summons from the draft board. In his letter to Arna Bontemps on Nov. 2, 1942, Langston Hughes writes: "I got a wire from New York that the draft board had sent me a card to report for my first

physical, which I did" (Nichols 118). Hughes writes about his first physical as a piece of fiction in this first column. The fictional segment is entitled "Guns and Shovels." Note how Hughes implements the basic Simple technique of personally participating in a conversation with the other fictional characters:

The cat was taking his first physical, standing in line in front of me at the hospital.

He said, "I know they gonna send all us cats to a labor battalion. I'm a truck driver, and I know they gonna make me a truck driver in the army."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"All the guys I know from Harlem", he said, "have gone right straight to labor battalions. Look at the pictures you see of colored soldiers in the papers, always working, building roads, unloading ships, that's all. Labor battalions! I want to be a fighter!"

"I know a fellow who's gone to Officers School," I said, "And another one learning to fight paratroopers."

"I don't know none," he said....

Another man in the line spoke up, older, dark brownskin, quiet. "Between Hitler and the Japanese," the other man said, "these white folks are liable to change their minds. They're beginning to find out they need us colored people."

It was that third fellow who took the conversation all the way from the here of Manhattan Island to the yonder of Hitler....

There [wasn't] chance to talk any more for the line moved on. He went in to the little room where the doctors were, had his blood drawn, and hurried off. I do not know his name. Probably our paths will never cross again. But I hope, since he wants to be a fighter, Uncle Sam will give him a gun, not a shovel or a truck. A gun would probably help his morale a little-now badly bent by the color line. (CD, Nov. 21, 1942, 14)

There are many similarities between this fictional

segment in Hughes' first "Here To Yonder" column and in his subsequent Simple columns. Note that this fictional segment is constructed out of a conversation between an "I," a "truck driver," and "another man." Most of Hughes' Simple columns are basically conversations between an "I" and a "Simple-Minded Friend." In the above citation, Hughes refers to himself as "I" just as he does in the Simple columns. Also, this "I" serves as a prototype of the "I" that appears in the mature Simple stories "by challenging the ordinary man's assumption and by raising a different point of view which speaks for the more educated and socially advantaged Black Americans" (Harper 163).

The relationship between the "I" persona and the truck driver in this sketch is similar to the one between him and Simple in the Simple columns. The persona shows his familiarity with the truck driver by introducing him as "the cat" just as he does with Simple by introducing him as "My Simple-Minded Friend."

One can easily see how the truck driver in this sketch serves as a prototype for Simple since it is he who spends the most time talking and arguing with Hughes' "I." Note that Hughes does not give a detailed description of either character in this fictional segment and neither does he when he first introduces Simple to his columns. This makes the characters more representative of the average working Black

man, the same role and function Simple will play in Hughes' later columns.

It is interesting to note how Hughes re-emphasizes the theme of this column through the voice of the third fellow when he writes: "It was that third fellow who took the conversation all the way from the here of Manhattan Island to the yonder of Hitler" (CD, Nov. 21, 1942, 14).

But, unlike the characters in this fictional segment, Langston Hughes never had to carry a gun or a shovel because he never participated in active duty during World War II. "In February [1943], when Hughes turned forty-one, President Roosevelt signed an order deferring the draft for men over thirty eight. Langston's trouble with the draft board was over." (Rampersad 2:56) Langston Hughes was thus free to write, lecture and do what he loved to do most, travel. Indeed, in this first column Hughes states: "For the last 20 years, half writer and half vagabond, I have travelled from here to yonder, around the world and back again, up and down the African coast, through Russia, through Asia, back and forth across America and, in general, from pillar to post" (CD Nov. 21, 1942, 14).

In many of his columns Hughes writes about the different countries and experiences he had while traveling from "pillar to post" thus making some of his columns sound like "autobiographical travelogues" (Harper 160). These

"autobiographical travelogues" in Hughes' columns gave the Chicago Defender readers "the news around the world," like CNN, by commenting on the social, cultural and political events of other countries in the world.

Langston Hughes concludes his first column by reporting about famous people and paying tribute to ordinary people:

I know lots of folks, whose names have never been in the newspapers-as interesting as those whose names have been in the papers. I shall write about them, also. Your folks and mine-as colored as me-scattered all over the world from here to yonder. From week to week, they-and you-shall be the subjects of this column. I got a feeling that you are me. And I know dog-gone well, Here is Yonder. (CD, Nov. 21, 1942, 14)

It is interesting to note that Hughes makes the same connection with his readers that he does with Jesse B. Semple when he writes, "*I got a feeling that you are me.*"

The closeness that Hughes feels to his readers is brought out more poignantly in one of his subsequent "Here to Yonder" columns entitled "Detroit Blues." In this column, Langston Hughes writes about how the war affects an "old man sitting on the front stoop of a ramshackled rooming house in Detroit" (CD, Sept. 11, 1943, 14). Although Hughes doesn't mention his name, he still feels that this old man is important enough for somebody "to answer [him] about the why and the wherefore of this war.... Somebody's got to be responsible for that old man's son over there and explain to him what the current confusion in race relations in America

is about." (CD, Sept. 11, 1943, 14) Later on, in his Simple columns, Langston Hughes uses Simple as that "Somebody" who addresses the *"why and wherefore of this war"* and who tries to explain *"the current confusion in race relations."*

However, Langston Hughes personally believed in the war. He felt that the "war presented an opportunity to crush both Fascism and Jim Crow [and] out of the struggle would come a better day for all" (Rampersad 2:54). Langston Hughes believed that this war would show Whites and Blacks how much they needed each other. He writes about this idea in his column appropriately subtitled "Purple Heart," which is a U.S. military decoration awarded to servicemen wounded in action. Here he points out: "There is no color line in death. In spite of each other, we [all] die for each other, poor whites, Negroes, soldiers, sons" (CD, March 24, 1945, 14).

Although he acknowledges the common bond that Whites and Blacks share as human beings, Hughes was fully aware of the tension, hatred and frustration which permeated the relationship between Whites and Blacks in the United States. In many of his non-fiction "Here To Yonder" columns and in his Simple columns as well, Langston Hughes addresses the state of race relations. In one of his columns subtitled "Letter to the South" Langston Hughes expresses how he is personally affected by White people:

Dear Southern White Folks:

You are as much a problem to me as I am to you, I mean personally and figuratively speaking....

Dear Southern White Folks, your Jim Crow cars I do not like at all. I do not like your Jim Crow waiting rooms in the stations where I have to stand patiently at the ticket window until all the white folks at the opposite window are served before I can even buy a ticket. I do not like having to sit next to the baggage car and not be able to go to the diner to eat when I get hungry. I do not like the white baggage car men...and the conductors and any other train employees sitting in whatever space there may be in my Jim Crow car, smoking, spitting, and cussing in front of colored ladies. (CD, July 10, 1943, 14)

It is interesting to note that Hughes concludes this column by emphasizing his common theme of how what happens over "here" affects what's going on over "yonder" and vice versa:

All the bad things you do to Negroes, Latin America knows about, in spite of the censorship. Asia knows, too. Do you think your allies who are colored trust you? They do not! And in the post-war world, you are going to need that trust. You are terribly simple-minded if you think you can live on this earth by yourself.

We may be problems to each other, but for your good and mine, from Beaumont to Detroit, we ought to get together and straighten our problems out. Certainly, I personally would be willing to talk sense with you and try to come to some solution because, God knows, YOU ARE A PROBLEM TO ME, Dear Southern White Folks.

As one can see, in this case, Langston Hughes is concerned with the state of race relations in the "post-war" world. However, by stating his willingness to get together with White people, Hughes illustrates his firm belief that it is possible for Whites and Blacks to get together and



work out their problems.

Still the tragedy of war, the injustices of segregation and the tension and strife in race relations might have overwhelmed the Defender's readers had it not been for Langston Hughes' wonderful sense of humor. Although some of Hughes' non-fictional, "Here To Yonder" columns about the war and segregation were quite serious, most of them contained a mixture of irony and humor. Langston Hughes believed that "humor is a weapon too, you know, of no mean value against one's foes." (CD, Nov. 6, 1943, 14) So, just like the Defender used comic strips and cartoons to add a dose of humor to the news, Hughes utilized humor as a weapon to fight racism and segregation within the United States. His prowess in handling this weapon is clearly seen in his conversations with Jesse B. Semple which began on February 13, 1943.

### Chapter III: Jesse B. Semple And The "Simple" Columns

The first Simple column, entitled "Conversation at Midnight, consists of a dialogue between an "I" and a "Simple Minded Friend." This first conversation opens with a light discussion about daytime and getting up early:

My Simple Minded Friend said, "Day time sure is a drag. I like night time a lot better."

"I do too." I said. "Day time hurts my eyes. I was born at midnight, but my mama told me I didn't start crying until morning. After that, I hollered and cried every morning straight for two years."....

"Nothing can make me like rising early," said my Simple Minded Friend. "Nothing."

"Then why don't you go to bed at some decent hour at night?" I asked.

"Why don't you?" demanded my Simple Minded Friend in return.

"I'm a writer," I said, "and I don't have to get up until noon. But if I had a job, I would go to bed on time. Here it is after midnight."

(CD, Feb. 13, 1943, 14)

However, the discussion takes on a more serious topic concerning the war and Jim Crow towards the end.

"It hurts my soul," said my Simple Minded Friend, "To be Jim Crowed hurts my soul. To have on my uniform and have to be Jim Crowed."

"If you beat Hitler, though, you'll be helping to beat Jim Crow."

"I want to beat Jim Crow first," said my Simple Minded Friend. "Hitler's over yonder, and Jim Crow is here."...

"[But], They do let you stay up late down South, if you want to," I said.

"They do, don't they? That is worth fighting for," said my Simple Minded Friend. "The right to stay up late! That is really worth fighting for."

"The fascists won't let Negroes stay up late."

"Then I will fight the fascists," said my Simple Minded Friend. "I will even get up early to fight for the right to stay up late. Damned if I won't!"

Despite the seriousness of Jim Crow and the war, this column still contains a large dose of humor by Simple agreeing at the end to "fight for the right to stay up late."

It is important to understand the nature of this dialogue between Hughes' "I" and his "Simple Minded Friend" since it is a fundamental attribute to all the Simple columns and to the development of the Simple character. According to Langston Hughes, the nature of these conversations "is really very simple. It is just myself talking to me. Or else me talking to myself... In the Chicago Defender columns concerning My Simple Minded Friend, I have developed this inner discussion into two characters: the this being me, and the that being Simple, or vice versa" (Hughes "Simple And Me" 349). In this first column, Hughes does not come right out and say that the fictional "I" is himself although this "I" is a writer, like Hughes. In most of Hughes' Simple columns, the fictional "I" remains anonymous. However, in one concerning segregation and World War II, Simple comes right out and calls the "I" "Mr Hughes":

"Listen, instead of talking about fighting the South-"

"There you go, changing the subject!"

"I'm not. I'm just trying to say, instead of FIGHTING the South, why not talk about CHANGING the South? Don't laugh, Simple! If America can change Germany and Italy from fascists to democratic states, as we are starting out to do, why can't we change the South?"

"YOU FELL right into my trap!" gloated Simple. "Now, I got you! How are we starting out to change Germany and Italy? Huh? By force of arms, that's how! By the biggest army ever raised in the history of America! By shooting them down! Now, how would you propose to change the South, Mr. Hughes?" (CD, June 26, 1943, 14)

Thus, this excerpt removes any doubt that the "I" in the Simple columns is not only a writer like Hughes but is, indeed, Hughes himself. On the other hand, the use of the name "Simple Minded Friend" implies that "this Simple character, like the truck driver and older man in Hughes' first column, had no real name" (Harper 175). Therefore, the Simple character in Hughes' Simple columns could at times represent Hughes or be just a hypothetical representative "of the general, working class readership of Hughes' column which allowed the average reader to identify more with the columns as if listening to someone they knew" (Harper 175). Thus, with the help of his Simple Minded Friend,

Hughes could present different points of view as to whether Jim Crow was worse than Hitlerism and yet still leave the readers with the message that their best interest was served by supporting the Allies in the war effort. (Harper 171)

Note that by the end of the first conversation, the "Simple

Minded Friend" agrees with Hughes' fictional "I", that it is in the best interest of all to help the Allies fight Hitler. However, that is not the case in most of Hughes' Simple columns because whatever point of view Hughes' fictional "I" takes on an issue, his Simple Minded Friend takes the opposing point of view. According to Hughes:

That is akin to what makes Simple interesting--the fact that what makes sense to one may not make sense to another. In life, as in art, the beginnings of drama lie in disagreement. As long as I let Simple disagree with me, we get along.

Once I did not permit him to disagree and he did not say anything more for weeks. He refused to argue or converse with me. During that time, naturally, he did not appear in the Chicago Defender.... On such occasions, when I sit down to write my weekly column, I cannot write about Simple at all if he is mad, since he refuses to cooperate.... I have to write all by myself at such times." (Hughes "Simple And Me" 353)

This excerpt illustrates the unique relationship that Langston Hughes had with his "Simple Minded Friend" and also explains why the "Simple Minded Friend" did not appear in Hughes' columns every week. However, if Hughes kept Simple out of his columns for too long, some of the Defender's readers would drop a note to Hughes requesting another Simple piece:

One reader informed Hughes that he and his office-mates were "happy to read another dialogue with your Simple Minded Friend. We hope your conversations with him will not be so far between from now on."

[Some readers] bitterly complained about Simple's absences from Hughes's column. "For two

whole weeks, now, we have looked for word of Mr. Simple in your weekly column, but to no avail.... Mr. Simple has become a pleasant habit to us; a habit we wouldn't like to break." (Harper 216)

Hughes reassured his readers that he was committed to the continuation of Simple by telling them, "please don't worry--Simple is a fixture" (Harper 216). This means that most of the disagreements between Hughes and his Simple Minded Friend were nothing more than just friendly spats. Hughes illustrates this point in one of his columns entitled "Ode To My Simple Minded Friend." This Simple column is different from all the other Simple columns since it is not merely a conversation but a lengthy, lyrical poem addressed to a "Simple Minded Friend":

Simple said, I like to argue  
Just for the sake of sound,  
That's why I'm glad  
When you come around.

I said, So you use your friends  
for sounding boards?  
Your "sound and fury's" liable  
To hurt your vocal cords.

Simple said, Don't bring me  
No literary hallucinations-  
Cause to dig what you mean  
Takes too much patience.

.....  
Come on, let's go inside  
And drink this beer,  
And leave our argument  
On the sidewalk here.

I said, I STILL say  
Your arguments are dumb.  
When you make a statement,  
You ought to show how come.

Simple said, I knowed  
 YOU'D get the last word in.  
 I aint convinced--  
 But, anyhow, you win! (CD, May 15, 1943, 14)

Although this column is a poetic conversation between Hughes' "I" and his "Simple Minded Friend," it still contains the essential attributes of irony and humor found in all Hughes' Simple columns, especially the ending.

The contrast in diction between the "I" and the "Simple Minded Friend" also adds to the irony and humor in this column. Since Hughes' "I" is a writer like Hughes, this "I" is familiar with various literary works and genres. This is evident from the use of the word "ode" in the title, which in classical literature refers to a poem intended to be sung by a chorus at a public festival or, as a part of a drama for a great noble person. However, this ode is not addressed to a great noble person, but rather ironically, humorously and affectionately, to a "Simple Minded Friend."

Simple's use of slang, as in the words "dig" and "aint," or mispronunciation of the phrase "literary hallucinations" for "literary allusions" provides humor and contrast to the "I"'s formal, stilted speech. However, Hughes did not always maintain separate patterns of speech for the fictional "I" and his "Simple Minded Friend." Sometimes his fictional "I" used slang instead of his rather customary "proper" speech. This inconsistency in diction is

evident in Hughes' Simple column entitled "Too Good A Time." In this column, the Hughes persona can't sympathize with Simple's hangover. Simple is asking for two dollars, which Hughes' "I" gives him, but not cheerfully. He exclaims, "Here, man, take the two bucks! But you still don't get my sympathy." In this case, the "I" has used the common street expression often associated with Simple when he calls Simple "man" and refers to dollars as "bucks." These discrepancies in diction occurred because,

Hughes' fictional "I" began as Hughes' own nonfiction voice [and] his language [was] quite naturally Hughes' own language--slang included. As the author gradually withdrew his own personality and replaced his former role with a more stereotypical "upper class" persona, he also deliberately rendered [his] persona's diction more formally. (Harper 255)

While Hughes made his persona's diction more formal, he developed the language of his "Simple Minded Friend" into a rich mixture of "old-fashioned Southern idiom and Harlem jive talk" (Davis 26). This is clearly seen in the following excerpt from one of Hughes' later Simple columns entitled "Without a Word of Warning Simple Discloses His Creative Self":

You remember once I showed you some of my poetries, don't you, daddy-o?"  
 "I remember," I said. "In fact, I will never forget the day."  
 "Well, I want to show you some more," said Simple. "How do you like this one?"  
 "Lord help me!" I said. "Do I have to read it?"



"You don't have to do nothing but stay black and die," said Simple, "but if you don't read it, I will read it to you. There being no pretty chicks in this bar this evening, we have to do something whilst drinking this beer."

"O.K. then, read on," I said.

"Listen fluently," said Simple....Here is a poetry I wrote after I read that piece about the Supreme Court saying that those white folks have to let colored folks study in that university down in Oklahoma whether they like it or not. And Oklahoma finally did give in, but they said colored folks would have to study in a separate little old room by their black selves.

(CD, Jan. 29, 1949, 14, added parenthesis)

In this citation, one can see that Simple's choice of words, such as "poetries" or "fluently" adds spice, wit and humor to the conversation. His use of the word "daddy-o" in the first sentence "is like a stinger on the end of a whip, giving a gay and flippant flavor to the whole sentence. Simple seems to use it only when he is in a gay and carefree mood. It is a combination term of endearment and pertness which gives a lift to any idea expressed" (Davis 26). One can also see, from this example, how Hughes utilized his Simple columns to comment on particular newsworthy events pertaining to segregation and race relations. By using his Simple Minded Friend as a news commentator, Hughes was following the advice of his closest friend, Arna Bontemps, who suggested to Hughes, in his letter on March 22, 1939, :

Your "Simple Minded Friend" seems to me a very happy creation, especially as a device for treating topics which would otherwise seem high-flown or academic. You can use him to show the application of theoretical questions to his life.

International events might thus be related to his affairs....It would be ideal, I'd think, to do an occasional "Friend" piece about the perplexity that comes to the common colored citizen when he tries to apply certain current statements of American ideals and war aims to life as he knows it. It might, in other words, be a way of commenting on current events and pronouncements.

(Nichols 30)

By reading his Simple column entitled "Simple Looks For Justice, one can see how Hughes utilizes his Simple Minded Friend to voice the anger and frustration of the common colored citizen living in America. This column concerns the Harlem riots which occurred on August 1-2, 1943. The riots were officially reported as beginning on Sunday evening, August 1, 1943:

James Collins, a policeman on duty in a fifth-rate Harlem Hotel, attempted to arrest a young Negro woman for disorderly conduct. A Negro military policeman, Robert Bandy is alleged to have interfered with the arrest and to have taken the officer's night stick and struck the officer; whereupon the officer drew his revolver and fired, wounding Bandy slightly. The officer was also wounded. Both were hospitalized. (Guzman 242)

Hughes' Simple column, printed on August 28, 1943, offers an eye-witness fictional account of the Harlem riots. It provides insight into the motivation and justification for some of the participants. It should be noted that this column "was one of the only printed sources to offer a first-person perspective from a participant in the riot" (Harper 185). As one can see, from the opening lines, Hughes' "Simple Minded Friend" is the active participant,

thus giving this column a sense of credibility:

"Where you been all summer," asked my Simple Minded Friend. "I haven't seen you around Harlem."

"I've been in the country," I answered.

"Then you missed the riots, huh?"

"Yes," I said. "Tell me about them. Where were you that night?"

"All up and down," he said.

"Grabbing hams out of broken windows?" I asked.

"No," he answered. "I didn't want no ham. I wanted justice."

"What do you mean, justice?" I said.

"You know what I mean as well as I do," he answered. "The cops have got no business shooting our soldiers." (CD, Aug. 28, 1943, 14)

The column continues with an account of Simple's participation in the riot:

"So I threw a couple of bricks through a couple of windows and I felt better," [said Simple].

"Did you pick your windows or did you just throw?"

"Well, there wasn't much time to pick on 125th street because the sirens was blowing and the PD's coming, but I aimed at two big ones - that cost them white folks plenty money to put back." (CD Aug. 28, 1943, 14)

One can see that this Simple column lacks the rich mixture of irony and humor which is so characteristic of other Simple columns, especially in its ending:

"If plenty thinking isn't done, neither of them works. Besides, an army with bombs is one thing, and you with a brick is something else."

"I am just me," said Simple, "looking for justice." (CD, Aug. 28, 1943, 14)

Instead, this column portrays the anger, frustration, desperation, and hopelessness of a person who feels betrayed

by the American justice system. This is particularly interesting in light of the 1992 Los Angeles riots which occurred after the "not guilty" verdict acquitting four white police officers for the brutal beating of Rodney King, a Black man. By reading this column, one does not get an excuse or a justification for the devastation, pain and cost of a riot. Instead, one gains insight into why a person, filled with hopelessness, rage and despair, would commit these insane acts of violence against their fellow man in order to find justice.

One also gets the impression here that Hughes' Simple Minded Friend is anti-white. Indeed, in another Simple column, Hughes' Simple Minded Friend states flat out that he does not like white people:

"I been a Negro all my life," said My Simple Minded Friend, "and I am not ashamed to be a Negro--but I cannot learn to like white folks."

"I do not like to hear you say that," I said, "because there are a lot of good white folks in this world."

"There are," said Simple, "but not enough of them. If there was, they would make this American country good."

"You cannot dislike all white people for what the bad ones do," I said.

"I do dislike them," said Simple.

"You are making a very broad generalization," I said, "because you told me yourself once that you would not let anybody do anything wrong to Mrs. Roosevelt."

"Mrs. Roosevelt is different," said Simple.

(CD, Nov. 23, 1946, 14)

However, by the fact that the Simple Minded Friend agrees

with Hughes that there are "a lot of good white folks in this world," one can see that Simple's "feelings are neither morbid nor bitter, are not very deep, and as a matter of fact, are not even consistent" (Davis 23).

The inconsistency in Simple's feelings about white people is apparent in this column by the way he feels about Mrs. Roosevelt. Hughes' Simple Minded Friend likes Mrs. Roosevelt and believes she is different. By having him support Mrs. Roosevelt, Hughes not only shows that there is at least one good white person in America but also complements the Chicago Defender's support of the Roosevelt presidential elections. It should be noted that in an earlier column Hughes allows his Simple Minded Friend to explain why he would vote for Mrs. Roosevelt rather than Mr. Roosevelt. Entitled "Simple and the Elections," this column appeared on August 12, 1944, about three months before the presidential elections. The following excerpt provides a humorous glimpse of how important the first lady can be in a presidential election:

"Who are you going to vote for?" I asked my Simple Minded Friend.

"Mrs. Roosevelt," he said.

"You can't vote for Mrs. Roosevelt. She is not running," I said.

"She is the same as running," said Simple. "Her husband is."

"I know that," I said, "but her husband is her husband, and Mrs. Roosevelt is Mrs. Roosevelt."

"All the same," said Simple, "I hope she gets

in."

"I keep trying to tell you, you cannot vote for Mrs. Roosevelt."

"Then I will vote for Mr. Roosevelt and when he gets in, she'll be in too. And she will talk for me."

"But actions speak louder than words," I said.

"That may be true," said Simple, "but words are warming to my heart. When Mrs. Roosevelt says good things about me, or writes about me in her column, it does me good. I like Mrs. Roosevelt, and I hope she gets in. I hope the President gets in too, but them Southern Democrats done got him hog-tied. He can't say what he thinks. But Mrs. Roosevelt, ain't nobody got her hog-tied. She don't let nobody get her hog-tied. That is why I vote for Mrs. Roosevelt. Do you dig me now?"

"I dig you, Jack. But I still say you have a misconception of the ballot-talking about voting for Mrs. Roosevelt." (CD, Aug. 12, 1944, 14)

Although one can argue that Mrs. Roosevelt never mentioned Simple in her acclaimed newspaper column, "My Day," she did mention Langston Hughes in one of her columns and "frequently used 'My Day' to promote a better understanding of the problems confronting minorities" (Chadakoff 1:325).

During the war, Langston Hughes used his Simple Minded Friend and his Simple columns to address the specific social and political concerns of Afro-Americans, such as political changes, racism, segregation and war. However, after presidential elections were over and the war ended in August 1945, Hughes focused more on refining and developing the character of Simple. Thus the Simple columns that were written after the war contained more humor and narration than the ones written during the war.:

If one analyzes the columns chronologically, the voice of the ["I"] increasingly withdraws, leaving the majority of the columns' message in Simple's voice. For example, by the time Hughes wrote "Simple Down Under" (CD, Feb. 28, 1948, 14), the foil does not speak at all, and in "Simple Thinks He's Simple" (CD Sept. 18, 1948, 14) the bar buddy speaks only one line. (Harper 207)

Increasing Simple's lines allows him to provide more details about himself and his life, thus beginning his transformation from a nameless newspaper persona to a unique, unforgettable, literary character.

Another noticeable difference in the post-war Simple columns is the way Hughes shortens and sharply defines Simple's name. In most of the early columns, Simple doesn't really have a name. Langston Hughes refers to him using the long phrase, "My Simple Minded Friend." After the war, Hughes provides Simple with a proper name and a nickname. This is clearly seen in a later Simple column, May 28, 1949, where Simple is telling his bar buddy about an argument he had with his wife:

"She hollers, 'You ain't responsible.'"  
 "'That's right,' I said, 'my name's not  
 Responsible. I am Jess Semple. You knowed my  
 name all the time.'  
 "She said, 'That e ought to be an i. Your  
 friend's nicknamed you right--Simple."  
(CD, May 28, 1949, 14)

Thus, "Semple," spelled with an "e," is the proper name and "Simple," spelled with an "i," is the nickname.

Simple's first name, "Jess," appears in this column as

well. Although this is the first time Hughes distinguishes between the spelling of Simple's last name, this is not the first time that Simple's first name appears. This was on November 3, 1945, in a column entitled "Simple's Indian Blood." This column is interesting not only because it is the first reference to Simple's first name, but also because it provides a brief, delightful sketch of Simple's background:

"Now, it were like this," said my Simple Minded Friend, "as to where I get my Indian blood. My uncle's cousin's great grandmother were a Cherokee."

"I did not know you had Indian blood," I said.

"I have," said Simple, "but I do not show it much."

"That I know," I said....."Did your granddad look like [an Indian]?"

"Only his nose," said Simple. "He was dark brownskin. In fact, he were black."....

"So, your grandpa was a drinking man," I said. "That must be who you take after."

"I also am named after him," said Simple. "Grandpa's name was Jess. My name is Jess, too."

"Jess," I said, "is certainly not an Indian name." (CD, Nov. 3, 1945, 14)

Although Hughes provides Simple's first name in this column, his middle name doesn't appear until after Hughes edited and revised this column for publication. The following is an excerpt from the revised version of this column, which was published in a collection of Simple stories entitled The Best Of Simple:

"So your grandpa was a drinking man, too. That must be whom you take after."



"I also am named after him," said Simple.  
 "Grandpa's name was Jess, too. So I am Jesse B.  
 Semple."

"What does the B stand for?"

"Nothing. I just put it there myself since they didn't give me no initial when I was born. I am really Jess Semple-which the kids changed around into a nickname when I were in school. In fact, they used to tease me when I were small, calling me 'Simple Simon.' But I was right handy with my fists, and after I beat the 'Simon' out of them, they let me alone. But my friends still call me, 'Simple'."

"In reality, you are Jesse Semple," I said,  
 "colored."

"Part Indian," insisted Simple, reaching for his beer.

"Jess is certainly not an Indian name."

(The Best of Simple 19)

There are obvious similarities between the original Simple column and this revised, published version in that some of the questions and answers remain basically the same. However, one of the most noticeable difference in the latter version is that Simple gives his full proper name--first, middle and last--along with a detailed account of how his name originated. Another noticeable difference is that he spells his first name once with and once without a "e" at the end when stating his proper name in the revised and published version. However, Simple spells his first name "Jess" without the "e" at the end when stating his proper name in the columns.

Still, if one pronounces Simple's full name in dialect "the name blurs into an exhortation to 'just be simple', a role into which many African-Americans were forced by

circumstance, albeit often ironically and for self-preservation, given America's racial situation. Under those circumstances, simple is complex, and so is Simple" (Tracy 243). Thus, Simple's name is not just a name but some sound advice on how to live life.

It should be noted that although Hughes defines and refines Simple's name, he hardly ever uses the full name in his columns. Instead, Hughes uses the nickname "Simple." Thus, he provides an identity for his Simple Minded Friend using his proper name while the use of the nickname "Simple" allows his readers to feel as if they're listening to someone they know.

Defining his name is not the only way Hughes chose to identify Simple. According to Simple, if one really wants to know something about his life, look at his feet:

"If you want to know about my life," said My Simple Minded Friend, "don't look at my face, don't look at my hands. Look at my feet and see if you can tell how long I been standing on them."

"I cannot see your feet through your shoes," I said.

"You do not need to see through my shoes," said Simple. "Can't you tell by the shoes I wear- not pointed, not rocking-chair, not French-toed, not nothing but big, long, broad, and flat-that I been standing on these feet a long time and carrying some heavy burdens."

(CD, July 9, 1949, 14)

As the column continues, the reader gets a glimpse of Simple's childhood.

"Virginia is where I was born," said

Simple...."When I was a wee small child... I had no place to set and think, 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 only had four rooms. I never had no place just to set and think. And when I grew up, I had no time to set. I been standing on my feet all my life."

Throughout his Simple columns, Langston Hughes randomly provides details of Simple's relatives who had a hand in raising him. One of these relatives is mentioned in one of Hughes' early Simple columns:

"You know my aunt Mable?" said my Simple Minded Friend.

"I do not know her," I said, "but I have heard you speak of her."...

"My Aunt Mable is a good woman. She likes to do things right." (CD, July 14, 1945, 14)

Simple obviously speaks of his relatives with love and respect, in spite of the fact that he was "passed around" a lot. In a later column, Simple talks about the good times he had eating with his Uncle Tige and Aunt Minnie:

"I was passed around," explained Simple.  
 "When I were a child, I was passed around. But not even with Grandma Arcie did I eat so good, not no place did I eat so good as with my Uncle Tige! Him and Aunt Minnie both liked to eat. They both could cook. And sometimes they would see who could out-cook each other. Chitterlings! Man, don't talk! Hog jowl, hogmaw, pig tails, pig feet! Man, they tasted like the Waldorf Astoria ought to taste-but I know it don't! Corn dumplings, greens, young onions! Catfish, buffalo fish, also perch! Cabbage with cayenne pepper! Chime bones with kraut! On Sundays, two hens stuffed with sage dressing! Unn-m-huh!

(CD, Dec. 22, 1945, 14)

Still, the relative who had the most influence on

Simple was his Aunt Lucy: "[It was] my Aunt Lucy who read the Bible to me when I were knee high to a duck. I never will forget it" (CD, Dec. 24, 1949, 14). It was also Aunt Lucy who gave Simple his last whipping. According to Simple, he was being punished because he had stolen one of Aunt Lucy's best laying hens:

"Comes whipping time, and just when I was aiming to snatch that switch, I seed that Aunt Lucy was crying when she told me to come there. I said, 'Aunt Lucy, what you crying for?' She said, 'I am crying 'cause here you is a man, and don't know how to act right yet, and I done did my best to raise you so you would grow up good. I done wore out so many switches on your back-and still you tries my soul. But it ain't my soul I'm thinking of, son, it's your'n. I wants you to carry yourself right and 'sociate with peoples what's decent and be a good boy. You understand me? I's getting too old to be using up my strength like this. Here!' she hollered, 'Bend over and lemme whip you one more time.'"...

"That was my last whipping. But it wasn't the whipping that taught me what I needed to know. It was because she cared-and cried. And when peoples care and cry for you, they can straighten out your soul. Ain't that right?"

"It's mighty near," I said.

(CD, May 19, 1945, 14)

Even though Simple didn't have an easy childhood, he still had a lot of love.

One of the later Simple columns, entitled "Simple and the Seasons," explains why he left the South: "I did not like them white folks and they did not like me. Maybe if it was not for them white folks, I would have stayed down South" (CD, June 7, 1947, 14). Simple eventually left the

South, fed up with the injustices of segregation and the racial tension between Blacks and Whites. He migrated north to Harlem where his feet "have stood on every rock from Rock of Ages to 135th and Lenox. [His] feet have supported everything from a cotton bale to a hungry woman. [His] feet have walked ten thousand miles working for white folks and another ten thousand keeping up with colored" (CD, July 9, 1949, 14).

In Harlem Simple can keep up with colored people since he is surrounded by them every day. That is one of the main reasons why Simple loves Harlem, "because it is so full of Negroes. He feels the protection that black faces give from a predominantly white world, a world which is too often hostile" (Davis 26).

For Simple one of the most secure places in Harlem is a bar:

"A bar is something to lean on," said My Simple Minded Friend.  
 "You lean on bars very often," I remarked.  
 "I do," said Simple.  
 "Why?" I asked.  
 "Because everything else I lean on falls down," said Simple, "including my peoples, my wife, my boss, and me." (CD, Nov. 22, 1947, 14)

In a Harlem bar Simple can finally get off his feet, have a few drinks and talk with his bar buddy, Langston Hughes. It is also in a Harlem bar, where Langston Hughes shares a conversation with the young man who becomes the prototype

for Jesse B. Simple. Although Hughes later lost touch with this young man, out of their conversation,

evolved the character [of Simple], wondering and laughing at the numerous problems of white folks, colored folks, and just folks-including himself. ...Usually over a glass of beer, he tells me his tales, mostly in high humor, but sometimes with a pain in his soul as sharp as the occasional hurt of that bunion on his right foot. Sometimes, as the old blues says, Simple might be "laughing to keep from crying." But even then, he keeps you laughing, too. If there were not a lot of genial souls in Harlem as talkative as Simple, I would never have these tales to write down that are "just like him." He is my ace-boy, Simple.  
(Best of Simple vii-viii)

In the published collection of Simple stories Langston Hughes often calls this Harlem bar, "Paddy's Bar." However, in the Simple columns Hughes never mentions its name. Therefore, it can be in any old Harlem bar room where Simple began his first "Conversation at Midnight" with his bar buddy, marking the start of the Simple columns and the beginning of a wonderful friendship.

Although Simple spends most of his evenings in a bar drinking and talking with his friend, during the day he works. Simple tells his bar buddy, "From eight in the morning to five at night, I do not lean on no bar. I works! Ask my bossman. He knows I work" (CD, Nov. 22, 1947, 14).

Hughes doesn't give a lot of details about Simple's work. However, he does state that Simple works in a war plant. One of the reasons Hughes doesn't reveal much about

Simple's job is that,

many Harlemites have rather lowly jobs which they often consider beneath their qualifications and education (and which they very often are). [Therefore,] one may know people in Harlem for years without really knowing exactly what kind of work they do....[perhaps,] because of shame to admit that their jobs are not up to what friends might expect of them.... It just wouldn't be mentioned much between Simple and a casual friend, perhaps never brought up as a direct question.  
(Harper 176)

No matter what kind of job Simple has, the little bit of money he does make is all spent on fun, beer, and women, especially on women. According to Simple, "Love....goes hand in hand with money....A man cannot take a girl out or in without money. If you go to a show, it's money. If you treat her to a drink, it's money. And a meal-that's mighty near a week's salary!" (CD, May 28, 1949, 14)

Simple's relationship with women is not only expensive but also provides a basic, thin story line which runs throughout the Simple columns. This plot basically concerns Simple trying to get a divorce from his wife, Isabella, so he can marry his girlfriend, Joyce, and his involvement with his "one-time play-girl, Zarita." (Best Of Simple viii)

Hughes first introduces Simple's relationship with his wife in his second Simple column, entitled "Wives, War and Money,":

"If I had a wife, I would stay with her," I declared.  
"That is because you have never been married."

You do not know how hard it is sometimes to stay with a wife."

"Elucidate."

"You have to take a wife with a grain of salt. But sometimes the salt runs out."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"Don't take serious everything a wife says."

(CD, Feb. 20, 1943, 14)

It is interesting to note that Langston Hughes, like his persona in this excerpt, was never married. However, Hughes did come close to marrying "his old Moscow sweetheart, the beautiful Afro-Chinese dancer Sylvia Chen" (Rampersad 1:286). Yet, since Hughes never made a formal proposal, Sylvia Chen's feelings for him began to change. She wrote in one of her last letters, "I find I can't be natural with you because you treat me and most people...so artificially" (Rampersad 1:288). Shortly afterwards, Sylvia Chen married someone else.

Yet, Sylvia Chen was not alone in feeling distant toward Hughes. To many of his closest cronies, "what [Hughes] did for sex was, as usual, a mystery" (Rampersad 1:289). According to Roy Blackburn, one of Hughes' male friends:

The topic of romance never arose with Hughes. "Langston never brought it up," he recalled. "We never talked about sex or the various ladies in the village in any way, even joking. He was an extremely private person, but he also seemed to have no interest whatsoever in the subject. Even then, it seemed to me odd, this lack of interest. We were both young men, and young men usually talk about women. There were times when I wondered whether he had any sexual feeling at all. I'm



really not sure he had any." (Rampersad 1:289)

John Short, another close friend of Hughes, remarked that:

Hughes was "always the center of lots of laughter. One could sense under the laughter an undercurrent of loneliness, or a deep quietude, but he was warm and loving and liked to touch and to hug, without the slightest inhibition in any way. On the other hand, one didn't get a sense of sexuality. Affectionate as he was with all of us, especially my mother, I felt then and later that Langston was asexual. I'm sure he was not a homosexual."  
(Rampersad 1:289)

Since Hughes did not have any personal experience and insight to bring to Simple's relationship with his wife, he allowed Simple to dominate the conversation. Most of these conversations never revealed the tender romantic moments in the marriage but instead, focused more on issues and problems. One of the major problems in Simple's relationship with his wife concerns money, as seen in this excerpt from a later column entitled "Simple's Domestic Problems":

"She said, 'You know what is the matter with me. Ever since I have been with you, I have been treated like a dog. Who is paying for this furniture? Me! Who keeps up the house rent? Me! Who pays that little dime insurance of yours? Me! And if you was to die, I would not get but three hundred dollars. You can't even get on WPA. But you better get on something. In fact, you better take over or take off.'"

"It were then that I took off," said Simple.

"And ever since you've been a free man," I said.

"Free?" yelled Simple. "Every time I look in [my] mail box there is a letter from Baltimore. I would have been free if I hadn't run into some old friend-boy here in Harlem who wrote and told my

wife where I was at. So far the last five years she has been writing me that if I wasn't going to give her a divorce, to at least buy her a fur coat." (CD, July 5, 1947, 14)

Here is the old familiar stereotype of a nagging wife and her hen-pecked husband. The bar buddy's comment that Simple is "a free man" raises another stereotype--i.e., that marriage "ties a man down" and enslaves him. Ironically, in this passage, Simple's wife is willing and even suggesting that Simple leave since she can do better without him.

By focusing on issues and stereotypes, Hughes portrays Simple's relationship with his wife as being more political and distant rather than intimate and personal. This makes Simple's marriage appear more like a political and social critique about women rather than a story with women. However, it is important to note that the details of Simple's relationships are not given in separate sections in the columns. Instead, they are scattered throughout the column often leading to a discussion of the problems and concerns which often plagued Afro-Americans during the 1940's. This is clearly evident by the way Hughes introduces Simple's girlfriend, Joyce:

"You know Joyce?" said my Simple Minded Friend.

"What Joyce?" I asked.

"My off-and-on girl," said Simple.

"Oh, sure," I said. "Why don't you go on and marry her?"

"You know why I don't marry her," said Simple, "because I ain't divorced. But that is

not what I was going to tell you. I bet you can't dig what she give me for a birthday present?"

"What?" I said, "Some handkerchiefs?"

"Naw," said Simple. "Joyce is an intellect. She don't give nobody nothing useful like handkerchiefs."

"Then it must have been a book," I said.

"It were not a book," declared Simple.

"Then for crying out loud," I said, "what did Joyce give you?"

"She took me to see Othello," said Simple.

"Robeson's Othello? Man! That must have been a treat!" (CD, June 3, 1944, 14)

The column then continues with a discussion between Simple and Hughes about Paul Robeson's acting in *Othello* and its racial significance. Although the column reveals how Simple and Joyce feel about the play, it never discusses how they feel about each other. Instead it is in a later column that the reader gets a glimpse of Simple's feelings toward Joyce and her feelings for him. Simple tells his bar buddy:

"I understand Joyce."

"Does she understand you?"

"She appreciates me," said Simple.... "We take each other as we is." (CD, Nov. 3, 1945, 14)

Although Simple and Joyce share a mutual respect for each other, there is still tension and conflict in their relationship because Simple is still married. In the following conversation Simple tells his bar buddy about the problem he is having with Joyce:

"Joyce says she is not built of bricks. She says she is got a heart, also a soul, also she is respectable. Joyce says she is getting tired of me coming to her house so regular and everybody

saying when is we gonna marry? She says I am staying there too late for her respectability. I said, 'One o'clock ain't late.' She said, 'No, but two and three o'clock is, and you sure can't stay till four.' I said, 'It ain't what you do, it's how you do it.' But she disagreed.

"She said, 'No! It ain't what you do. It is what folks think you do. And folks see you coming out of my place at two-three-four o'clock in the morning, you know what they think-even if it ain't so. Now, I have been knowing you too long not to be married to you. It were not just day before yesterday that we met,' Joyce said."

(CD, Dec. 1, 1945, 14)

However, it is very difficult to follow the development of Simple's relationship with Joyce and his wife, Isabella, in the columns because they are not arranged in chronological order. Therefore, when Hughes revised the Simple columns for his first collection, entitled Simple Speaks His Mind, he "shaped the stories so that they appeared more like a book than like the random newspaper columns they had been" (Harper 270). Hughes writes about some of these changes in a letter to his editor, Maria Leiper:

The plot line of Simple's first wife, the divorce, and Joyce has been strengthened and the narrator's character built up a bit. A completely new sequence of chapters has been devised and links inserted so that a number of them seem to flow, story-wise, one into another; also the round-the-year flow of the seasons help to hold them together [too]. (Harper 271-272)

In addition, Hughes enhanced the story line involving Simple's first wife by combining

chronologically distant columns to more clearly explain how the marriage to Isabella had felt to Simple....He gave the collection a sense of passing time by indicating Simple's progress or frustration in accumulating the \$300 need to pay for a divorce. Langston Hughes also created "A

Letter from Baltimore," which ends the finished collection by allowing Simple to secure his divorce from Isabella. (Harper 272)

"A Letter from Baltimore" also appears in the Chicago Defender but only after "Hughes was busily engaged in revising his first Simple collection for the editors at Simon and Schuster" (Harper 272).

Although Hughes does not provide a clear story line in his Simple columns, he does introduce the three central characters who play a major role in his first Simple book: Isabella, Joyce, and Zarita. Hughes first introduces Zarita in the Simple column entitled "On Women Who Drink You UP," where he tells his bar buddy:

"The other night I met an old girl in her, and she sat right there at that table and drunk six rum-colas, for which I paid."...

"'What is your name?' I asked her very quiet."

"'Zarita,' she chirped."

(CD, June 24, 1944, 14)

However, Simple finds out that just because he spent all his money buying Zarita drinks, sat and rapped with her awhile and then walked her home, Zarita still wouldn't kiss him or let him "taste some lipstick." (CD, June 24, 1944, 14). So Simple told her, "If I ever hear anybody say Zarita again, I will run the other way--and I will not look back" (CD, June 24, 1944, 14). Yet, by the time this column ends Simple is right back chasing after Zarita:

"Look! Yonder comes Zarita now. Boy, lend me a couple of bucks till pay day. You know, I'm kinder short," said Simple.

"I thought you said you was off women who

drink a man up. Haven't you learned your lesson yet?"

"I did not ask you for no sermon," said Simple. "I asked you for two bucks. It is a poor fool who cannot change his mind.... Take it easy, pal!....Good evening, Zarita!"

Throughout the Simple columns Simple is constantly chasing after and fooling around with Zarita, even though he says that:

"She won't let no man tie her down. She says so herself. Plays the field, been playing it, and means to keep on playing it-no intention of being housebroke. Zarita will stick by a man only until the bottle is empty." (Simple Takes A Wife 221)

Simple's relationship with Zarita is also further developed in Simple Speaks His Mind. However, it is in his second book about Jesse B. Simple, entitled Simple Takes A Wife, that Hughes explores and develops Simple's relationship with these three women (along with many others) and where he writes the final chapter to Simple's relationship with women.

By 1949, Hughes had found a publisher for Simple Speaks His Mind, his first collection of Simple stories. On February 21, 1949, Langston Hughes received an advance of nine-hundred dollars from Simon & Schuster for Simple Speaks His Mind which was published the following year. Thus, during 1949 Langston Hughes began to make the transition from newspaper columnist to literary author.

On December 31, 1949, Langston Hughes wrote his last column for the Chicago Defender, paying tribute to the "many Negro 'firsts' and Negro individuals who have made their

mark on American History" (CD, Dec. 31, 1949, 14). Although Hughes honors many famous and distinguished Afro-Americans in this column, he paid his greatest tribute those whose names and faces may never appear in a newspaper, through his creation of Jesse B. Simple. For by the time Hughes had ended his Simple columns to finish his first collection of them, Simple had become a real person to many of Hughes' readers.

Some readers sincerely believed in the authenticity of the Simple Minded Friend, even going so far as to offer, via Hughes, messages and even gifts for Simple. One reader sent Simple "one of the Holtford's famous inhalers," strictly warning Hughes "that this inhaler is not for you but for your simple-minded friend. If you need one for yourself you may buy it." This generous fan went on to provide explicit directions for using the inhaler:

I notice that Simple likes a gang of lush [alcoholic beverage]. I am afraid that he will not be able to work some Monday morning.

... When you meet him on the street early some morning full of that gage, simply stick the bottle under his nose. Remember bottle not cork. Believe me my friend he will become as sober as a judge should be.

I hope Simple will like this little present.  
(Harper 217-218)

Even Langston Hughes noted that,

among my readers, there is an old lady who reads and remembers everything My Simple Minded Friend says and quotes it back at me with glee. She remembers practically nothing that I say in print-which would make Simple a better writer than me, if he wrote. But, fortunately, he does not write. He talks and I write.

("Simple and Me" 349)

Yet, not all readers liked Simple. One remarked: "We do not hate the simple minded friend in your column--but he must

learn through severe and extended criticism that he is not wanted and that there is no place for him where this race is going" (Harper 218). However, even though this reader disapproves of Simple's character, her comment still affirms how real Simple is to many Chicago Defender readers. Thus, through Simple, Langston Hughes has found a way to "express his appreciation to his readers by giving them a voice in [his] column" (Harper 219).



## Conclusion

Through Jesse B. Semple millions of poor, Black people found a voice and a presence in the Black newspaper to express the fears, concerns, joys and sorrows they face each day. It is Simple's humorous and sometimes bitter comments on segregation, war, politics, and racial strife that enabled the Chicago Defender to lead the Black press in voicing the plight and concerns of Afro-Americans at home and abroad. The humorous, "uninhibited, intimate [and] to the point conversations that Hughes shared with Simple allowed one to gain a rare insight into the private conversations of Negroes" (Smith 20).

As Langston Hughes continued to define and develop his character, Jesse B. Semple grew from a Simple Minded Friend into a prominent literary character. Through Hughes' five collections - entitled Simple Speaks His Mind, Simple Takes A Wife, Simple Stakes A Claim, The Best Of Simple, and Simple's Uncle Sam - Simple transcends time, place and race to eventually become "experience's very self" (Rampersad 2:275).

Most of all, the character of Jess B. Semple gave the Chicago Defender readers of the 1940's and the literary readers of today a reason to smile in the midst of tragedy and uncertainty and showed us all how to simply live.

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## **Biography**

Mary Ann Massey was born in Newburgh, New York. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Cornell University. In May, 1994, she will receive her Master of Arts degree in English from the University of Richmond. She plans to pursue a professional career in teaching.



