



# The Image of Santa Claus in Langston Hughes’ “One Christmas Eve” – An Analysis

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The article analyses the image of Santa Claus in Langston Hughes’ “One Christmas Eve”. In this short story, a little boy, Joe is humiliated by Santa Claus and some rich white people in a theatre. The historic and original image of Santa Claus is traced and compared with the image presented by Langston Hughes in the story. The theme of racial and economic discrimination is discussed briefly and the plight of Arcie as a single parent is described.

In Lanston Hughes’ “One Christmas Eve”, Arcie, a coloured maid, is presented as a single parent, working at a white lady’s house. On the day of Christmas Eve, the missus made her wait for a long time as she had gone for shopping with her children. She denied to give the full amount of Arcie’s pay. After getting the meagre amount from her mistress, Arcie went to the house of the land lady who was looking after her little son Joe. The land lady was angry with Arcie for her late arrival and shouted at her. Arcie remained silent because she had nobody to look after her son, Joe. The plight of Arcie as a single parent is pitiable. She decided to buy a simple Christmas gift for her six years old son Joe in the dime store. On their way to the store, they passed a moving picture theatre. The innocent boy wanted to go in and see the movies. She prevented him saying it was a theatre meant especially for the white people. Then, the mother and her son came to the dime store. She asked him to stand outside the store as she didn’t want him to see what toys she was buying. She liked to surprise him with the new gifts on the day of Christmas. Joe became tired of waiting in front of the ten-cent store and started moving from there. (literaryfictions.com)

When Joe finally came to the white man’s picture show, he saw a big ,jovial man amidst a group of children and their parents. He recognised him as Santa Claus. He was giving away gifts to the children. The children happily received little boxes of animal crackers and sticky candy canes. Joe liked to have a stick-

candy cane. As he came closer to Santa, the white people noticed him and started laughing. Everybody grinned at him as if he trespassed into their realm. Santa Claus picked up one of his big rattles, a great big loud tin-pan rattle such as they used in cabarets and shook it fiercely right at Joe. Little Joe was greatly scared and the sudden laughter of all the white people including children frightened him a lot. He turned and ran out of the theatre. He never thought that Santa Claus shook rattles at children like that. (literaryfictions.com)

The name Santa Claus has its roots in the informal Dutch name for St. Nicholas, Sinterklaas. Saint Nicholas was a historic fourth century Greek saint. Being the patron saint of children, St. Nicholas has long been associated with giving gifts to children. He was known for secret gift giving, such as putting coins in the shoes left out for him. He was also famous for providing the three poor daughters of a pious Christian with dowries. (publicdomainreview.org)

In “One Christmas Eve”, the image of Santa Claus was largely used for commercial purposes. In the lobby of the Gem Theatre, there were many signs on the marvellous Christmas tree. “Merry Xmas from Santa Claus to our young patrons”. The lobby of the theatre abounds in signs such as “When you come out of the show, stop with your children and see our Santa Claus”. The exploitation of Santa Claus for mercantile profits is evident in the use of the phrase “Our Santa Claus”. And there is an announcement that rattles and drums and rocking horses would be presented from the stage on Christmas Day to the holders of lucky numbers. The image of Santa Claus was exploited to attract more customers to the theatre. Santa Claus is the perfect mascot for materialism.

Role reversal is a situation in which two people exchange their usual duties or positions. (dictionary,Cambridge.org). It is also defined as a situation in which someone adopts a role the reverse of that which one normally assumes to in relation to someone else. Here, in “One Christmas Eve”, the role of Santa Claus is reversed and changed to opposite. He is opposite to what he is supposed to be. He is completely different from an ideal or typical Santa Claus. An ideal Santa Claus must be soft spoken, kind hearted, and sympathetic. But to Joe, he is a terrifying and horrifying figure. He is a nightmare to the innocent boy.

The entire concept of gift-giving by Santa Claus stems from the fact that it motivates children to be well behaved and good throughout the year. Santa Claus is symbol of joy, happiness and euphoria for kids. He is considered as an advocate for vulnerable children, He provides the children with a lifetime happiness.

Uncongenial social environment perpetuates antisocial acts and provides serious temptation for the youngsters to become delinquents in order to fulfil their unfulfilled desires and needs. The scarifying and frightening experience will definitely create indelible impression in Joe’s young mind. He cannot understand the wicked and sinful activities of the unscrupulous people who have resorted to religious trickery to promote their own selfish ends.

Joe said to her mother tearfully, “Santa Claus didn’t give me nothing. He made a big noise at me and I runned out”. His mother consoled him that he was not a real Santa Claus and if he had been real one, he would not have treated a little boy like that. She strongly remarked that he was just an old white man.

To bring out the theme of racial and economic discrimination, Langston Hughes explicitly exposed the corrupt image of Santa Claus. Little Joe became a prey to racial discrimination. The little boy was so much humiliated that he could not help crying. The intolerable situation forced him to flee the theatre immediately. The unfavourable portrait of the Santa Claus refers to the follies and absurdities of the corrupt religious men. They are merely driven by the monetary greed. Their snobbish behaviour is evident with their dealings with the rich people. They have no concern for the poor, oppressed and voiceless people. They are not spiritual in its true sense.

## References

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