

SMILING THROUGH THE BLUES: HUGHES' SIMPLE TALES OF COMPLEX TRUTHS

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Abstract

Langston Hughes' Simple Speaks His Mind (1950) is a brilliantly sharp and witty exploration of race, gender, and societal inequality, channelled entirely through the perspective of Jesse B. Semple or simply, "Simple." With his signature blend of humour as a weapon and blunt honesty as his guide, Hughes masterfully invites readers into the vibrant, yet complex world of 1950s Harlem. Simple searches life's most challenging landscapes, from the trials of love and the complications of marriage to the formation of personal identity, all set against the persistent backdrop of racial and economic struggles. His unvarnished, streetwise perspective offers a deeply refreshing and essential view for the reader. Through Simple's eyes, Hughes executes a piercing critique of prevailing cultural expectations, the nature of personal empowerment, and the inherent power of language itself. This article contends why Hughes' masterpiece maintains such a strong resonance even today. By documenting the everyday life, struggles, and trenchant observations of African American life, Hughes's Simple offers profound insights that continue to shed light on the ongoing fight for social equality. The work preserves a crucial historical voice while remaining fiercely relevant to contemporary dialogues on equity and truth. It is a work of enduring social commentary wrapped in an accessible and profoundly human package.

Keywords: Langston Hughes, Simple Speaks His Mind, Harlem Renaissance, Cultural Identity, Humour and Satire, Language as Resistance

Smiling Through the Blues: Hughes' Simple Tales of Complex Truths

The foundations of Langston Hughes' (1901-1967) artistic and political sensibilities are traceable through his family's profound heritage. His maternal great-uncle, John Mercer Langston, a distinguished African American leader of the nineteenth century and brother to Hughes' maternal grandfather, Charles Henry Langston, chronicled the struggles and triumphs of Black Americans during Reconstruction in his revealing autobiography (*Langston Hughes - Wikipedia*, n. Rampersad, 2004). This legacy of activism and political engagement was further complemented by

his maternal grandmother, Mary Patterson Langston, who helped instil in him a lasting sense of racial pride and duty (*Langston Hughes - Wikipedia*, n.d.). Hughes' mother, Carrie Langston Hughes, a schoolteacher, nurtured her own creative aspirations as a poet and actress, weaving an essential artistic thread through the family's environment (Rampersad, 2004). During his often lonesome formative years, especially amidst the frequent absence of his mother and the self-imposed exile of his businessman father, James N. Hughes to Mexico, Langston Hughes sought refuge in literature (*Langston Hughes - Wikipedia*, n.d.). Reflecting on these early influences, Hughes acknowledged the Bible as a foundational wellspring of inspiration and guidance (Hughes, 1940).

This deep-rooted personal history coincided with a pivotal moment in American intellectual discourse. Just one year after Langston Hughes' birth in 1902, W.E.B. Du Bois's seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), articulated the profound struggles faced by Black Americans in the aftermath of the Civil War, laying the groundwork for modern civil rights analysis. By the 1920s, Hughes had emerged as a formidable new voice. His 1921 poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," published by the NAACP's magazine, *The Crisis*, was immediately lauded for its eloquent and timeless evocation of African American history and heritage (*The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, 1921). This powerful work, composed when Hughes was only eighteen years old, masterfully employs the primal imagery of four great rivers, the Euphrates, Congo, Nile, and Mississippi, to forge an ancestral link between the speaker's soul and the sweeping, millennia-deep history of the African diaspora. It served as a pivotal, resonant affirmation of Black antiquity and identity, immediately cementing Hughes's status as a major, foundational voice of the budding Harlem Renaissance. Hughes contributed significantly to this vibrant cultural movement that sought to boldly celebrate and elevate the artistic and intellectual achievements of African Americans, becoming known as the "Poet Laureate of the Negro Race" (Rampersad, 2004).

Hughes' writing consistently depicted the adversities and fortitudes of African Americans in the face of discrimination and prejudice (Hughes, 1940). As a committed social activist, he dedicated himself to supporting civil rights and labour groups, tirelessly advocating for economic and racial equality (Rampersad, 2004). Central to his artistry was the celebration of Black culture and ancestry, a theme powerfully articulated in autobiographical works like *The Big Sea* (Hughes, 1940). Hughes passed away on May 22, 1967, in New York City, leaving behind an indelible literary and social legacy that continues to be studied and

cherished (Rampersad, 2004). His profound and lasting contributions to American literature and the fight for social justice firmly cemented his place as one of the most impactful figures in both African American and American literary history. His body of work perpetually shapes critical discussions on race, identity, and cultural heritage.

Langston Hughes' inaugural collection, *The Weary Blues* (1926), earned significant acclaim, including the prestigious Harmon Gold Medal for Literature, and remains celebrated for its vivid depiction of African American life and its intrinsic connection to the rhythms of Black music (Rampersad, 2004). His later work, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), is particularly renowned for the poem "Harlem," a powerful and haunting meditation on the deferred dreams and lingering frustrations experienced by African Americans (Hughes, 1951). The poem "Let America Be America Again" (1936) offers a sharp critique of the exclusion of African Americans from the promised ideals of the American Dream (Hughes, 1936). Furthermore, his first novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930), tells the compelling story of a Kansas-born African American boy, directly addressing challenging themes of racial injustice, poverty, and the complexities of Black life in America (Hughes, 1930). Collectively, Hughes' vast and varied literary output continues to be an essential influence on American literature, African American history, and cultural studies.

A 1950 collection of short stories, *Simple Speaks His Mind* captures the rhythms of everyday life against the backdrop of a nation in transition, as mid-century America confronts both social upheaval and political change. Harlem was then a vibrant centre of African-American culture and activism, and the narratives reflect a time shaped by the early Civil Rights Movement and the rising tensions of the Cold War. Hughes' stories offer a vivid window into the quotidian realities of African Americans' urban life. Jesse B. Semple, or "Simple," emerges not as a conventional hero, protest icon, or fiery agitator, but rather as an everyman whose strength lies in his humour and steadfast resolve in confronting everyday struggles. As Jack Rummel observes, "Jesse Semple does not seem to be a fighter. He does not directly challenge racist obstacles, but he does confront the problems of everyday life with humour and quiet determination" (Rummel & Wagner, p. 89). Through his relatable wit and candid voice, Simple captivated a wide audience, initially reaching Black readers via widely circulated newspapers and subsequently engaging white audiences through published collections that broadened the scope of his cultural impact.

Langston Hughes' creation, Simple, serves as a piercing lens through which the social and political realities of mid-20th-century America are examined. Simple's narratives vividly encapsulate the lived experiences of African Americans navigating the complexities of urban Harlem. Through comedy, sharp wit, and an acute consciousness of systemic injustices, Simple offers a distinct vantage point on both the hardships and triumphs inherent in Black life within a racially fraught society. Hughes skillfully employs Simple to intertwine humour with pointed social critique, thereby illuminating the quotidian challenges and celebrations of African-American existence with nuance and empathy. These vignettes, drawn from the Harlem milieu, provide a compelling and instructive portrayal of the ordinary working-class individual who keenly observes the textures of daily life. For instance, in reflecting on the nature of justice, Simple remarks, "You look at everything, I regret to say, in terms of black and white... So does the Law" (Hughes, 1950, p. 172), exposing the pervasive binary thinking that shapes societal judgment.

While he faces economic struggles, racial discrimination, and personal setbacks, Simple typically probes into these obstacles with humour, resilience, and a sense of hope. Comparing life to a stew, according to Simple, stirring it often will result in the accumulation of sediment on its surface. Simple usually chats with friends and acquaintances at bars or other social places. Readers see community and societal changes through these connections. Through the character of Simple, Hughes illuminates enduring themes of resilience, creativity, and self-definition. He deftly captures the nuanced experiences of the African-American community amid a transformative era in American history.

The title *Simple Speaks His Mind* implies a book about Simple, a character who speaks his mind freely. In his Foreword ("Who is Simple?") to *The Best of Simple* Langston Hughes (1961), he explained:

"Simple, as a character, originated during the war. His first words came directly out of the mouth of a young man who lived just down the block from me. One night, I ran into him in a neighbourhood bar and he said, "Come on back to the booth and meet my girlfriend." I did, and he treated me to a beer. Not knowing much about the young man, I asked where he worked. He said, "In a war plant."

I said, "What do you make?"

He said, "Crank."

I said, "What kind of cranks?"

He said, "Oh, man, I don't know what kind of cranks."

I said, "Well, do they crank cars, tanks, buses, planes, or what?"

...Whereupon, his girlfriend, a little put out at this ignorance of his job, said, "You've been working there long enough. Looks like by now you ought to know what them cranks crank."

"Aw, woman," he said, "you know white folks don't tell coloured folks what them cranks crank."

. . . Out of the mystery as to what the cranks of this world crank, to whom they belong and why, there evolved the character (Simple), wondering and laughing at the numerous problems of white folks, coloured folks, and just folks -including himself. (Hughes, 1961, pp. vii–viii)

By using the character of Simple, Hughes explores how language can empower individuals and challenge racial and economic inequities. Simple, embodying the ordinary man, resists societal norms and prejudice with his blunt, unvarnished speech. His openness, as he "gives his opinion without euphemisms," allows him to cut through social etiquette and expose uncomfortable truths, questioning the status quo. This directness shows how language is not just a means of expression but also a means of resistance and empowerment, particularly for marginalised communities. Simple's choice of words and dialect carries symbolic weight, serving as a form of resistance against linguistic assimilation and affirming the value of Black vernacular. In his work, he often defended the incorporation of racial themes and jazz as central expressions of Black life. He once said, "Jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America: the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul. The tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile" (Hughes, 2009, para. 3). For Hughes, the imperative for Black artists was to surmount the "racial mountain," the internalised pressures to conform to white cultural standards, and to embrace with confidence the richness of their own racial identity. He famously proclaimed, "Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro and beautiful!" (Hughes, 2009, para. 5). This message of self-affirmation resonates in Simple's character, who resists societal expectations through his candid, unfiltered speech.

In *Simple Speaks His Mind*, symbolism enriches the narrative by employing objects and imagery to communicate layered social critiques. The “little yellow dog” that Simple encounters serves as a poignant emblem of the marginalised, those neglected and rendered invisible within the broader society. Simple’s act of taking the dog with him signifies his empathy and solidarity with the oppressed, highlighting his compassionate resistance to societal exclusion. Equally significant is the “big white house”, where Simple labours as a janitor, a stark symbol of the wealth and privilege enjoyed by the white upper class. Simple’s role within this space accentuates the entrenched social and economic disparities that delineate the boundaries between the privileged few and the disenfranchised many in mid-century America. Hughes’ use of language in his works is marked by its authenticity, often blending humour with sharp social observation. The tone is typically satirical, yet resilient, offering a balance between entertainment and deeper social critique. Simple’s witty remarks provide both comic relief and insight, demonstrating Hughes’ skill in using vernacular speech to make serious points about race, class, and identity. Through Simple’s clever quips and direct expressions, Hughes highlights the value of authentic Black voices in literature and the importance of representing working-class African-American engagement.

One of the most compelling aspects of the story lies in its ironic portrayal of Simple, who, despite being frequently underestimated as uneducated and unsophisticated, often exhibits a clearer, more grounded understanding of the world than his ostensibly more learned and worldly friend. This inversion disrupts the traditional equation of formal education with true wisdom, reinforcing Hughes’ conviction that insight and knowledge reside in diverse voices, irrespective of social standing or intellectual pedigree. Hughes’ words resonate deeply with this theme:

“Hold fast to dreams.

For if dreams die

Life is a broken-winged bird.

That cannot fly” (Hughes, 2002, lines 1–4)

This evocative metaphor encapsulates the story’s core message of perseverance amid hardship, highlighting the vital necessity of nurturing one’s aspirations in the face of relentless challenges.

Ultimately, *Simple Speaks His Mind* offers a rich exploration of race, class, and identity, using Simple's unvarnished language and ironic insights to critique social norms and give voice to those who have often been ignored. Through humour, wit, and symbolic imagery, Hughes creates a narrative that is both amusing and contemplative, shedding light on the African-American experience while challenging readers to reconsider their assumptions about race, education, and social inequality.

In *Simple Takes a Wife* (1953), Langston Hughes follows the charming and lovable Simple as he is trapped in the complexities of married life. Set in the 1950s, the story blends humour with heart, making it relatable to anyone who has experienced love or marriage. The story's setting in Harlem, reflects Langston Hughes' enduring connection to the neighbourhood, which was instrumental in his rise to prominence as a poet in 1922. This setting not only highlights his belief in the untapped potential of the African-American experience but also suggests his temporary shift from poetry to prose as a way to more directly engage with the complexities of life in Harlem "all mixed up", to explore aspects of the Negro theme that remain underexplored. At the center is Simple, a quick-witted but idealistic man, longing to settle down, whose traditional views on marriage and gender roles are challenged by his strong-willed wife, Joyce. The story also features a vibrant cast of characters, including Buddy, Simple's humorous friend, and Joyce's disapproving mother, each contributing to the narrative's exploration of love, relationships, and the challenges of African Americans in the mid-twentieth century.

Through Simple's journey, Hughes delves into the complexities of marriage, exploring the friction between entrenched gender roles and evolving social realities, while also illuminating the challenges faced by marginalised communities. The characters emerge as richly textured individuals, each marked by unique idiosyncrasies and personal drives that animate the narrative. Ultimately, *Simple Takes a Wife* serves as a poignant meditation on the human condition, showcasing Hughes' astute understanding of both intimate relationships and broader societal forces, rendered with a blend of humour, nuance, and emotional resonance. Since its initial publication in 1953, the story has endured as a powerful testament to Hughes' ability to intertwine incisive social critique with compelling, accessible storytelling.

Like the volumes that precede it, *Simple Takes A Wife* reveals the touch of a sympathetic hand, reflecting an author whose background and empathy allow him to laugh *with* the Harlem dweller, rather than at him. The book is divided into three groups of stories- “Honey in the Evening,” “Manna from Heaven” and “Sassafras in Spring,” ((Hughes, 1953) However, these divisions are largely formal and do little to unify the collection. The fifty-six sketches in the volume are engaging and accessible, with many primarily serving to place Simple in social situations where he can “out Herod Herod,” thereby revealing the depth of his character. (Hughes, 1953). While the theme is not always easy to pinpoint, these interactions offer rich insights into Simple’s personality and worldview. The sketches reveal a range of human emotions: anxiety, exasperation, affection, loathing, instability, pretence, along with both the virtues and vices concealed in people’s hearts and minds. As for plot, the book has a clear beginning and end, but little else in between.

The story is set in a cramped Harlem apartment shared by Simple and his friend Buddy, setting the stage for a humorous yet poignant exploration of marriage. Simple, a middle-aged man, passes through the ups and downs of his new marriage to Joyce, whose desires for a better life contrast with Simple’s hesitancy to fully commit. Simple’s restless shifts from one woman to another, and from one bar to the next, disrupt any attempt at a tightly structured narrative, and this is precisely the effect seen in *Simple Takes a Wife*. The unity of the volume rests on the unpredictable consistency of Simple, whose actions, always inconsistent, drive the narrative. Hughes neither justifies nor condemns Simple’s behaviour, leaving readers to question his motivations. After rejecting numerous proposals, Simple marries Joyce, driven by love and a desire to escape Harlem’s “Rooming House Set” (Hughes, 1953). Yet, he never fully reflects on the deeper forces shaping his life, which seem destined to lead to his undoing. For Simple, Harlem offers everything he wants, at least in comparison to the segregated world of Virginia, and so he settles into it without much thought. It’s a cycle of Harlem, then more Harlem, with little consideration of a life outside the “great dark city” where he might be truly simple, untainted and unburdened (Hughes, 1953). Ultimately, perhaps it is best that we are left with the hard-earned wedding and then let Simple and Joyce fade from our thoughts. *Simple Takes a Wife* does more than merely extend the legacy of Simple; it elevates Langston Hughes as a master of letters. Though Simple may have

been “born in a typewriter,” without even the aid of a midwife, he has become a character so vivid and real that he feels more substantial than many people one encounters in daily life (Hughes, 1961). As a fully realised figure, Simple invites comparison to other iconic folk characters like Appleseed Johnny and Uncle Remus. The fact that fans write letters directly to him, rather than to his creator, further attests to his flesh-and-blood presence (Hughes, 1961). But the book accomplishes much more. It showcases Hughes’ skilful use of humour, both in his characterisations and the situations he crafts, demonstrating his mastery of the simple narrative as a literary form. Hughes displays his signature spontaneity, sensitivity, and charm, with a rich tapestry of wit, repartee, and stylistic finesse that enhances the narrative from start to finish.

Hughes infuses a sense of levity that tempers the gravity of its themes, using the character of Simple as a vehicle for both humour and emotional depth. Simple’s wit, conversational ease, and reflective charm make him an engaging presence, and his comedic observations on love, life, and marriage provide a counterbalance to the narrative’s more serious undertones. Hughes is able to explore complex emotional terrain without sacrificing the accessibility or warmth of the story. One particularly resonant moment occurs when Joyce, now Simple’s wife, discloses that she is pregnant. Though initially startled, his ambivalence about marriage still lingering, Simple gradually begins to envision the possibilities within their new reality. As Joyce shares her hopes for their family’s future, the conversation deepens into one of vulnerability and mutual recognition (Hughes, 1953). In this quiet exchange, Hughes captures the evolving contours of their relationship, revealing how unanticipated developments can foster intimacy, reshape expectations, and renew one’s sense of commitment. The moment opens the emotional layers of marriage, emphasising that genuine connection often arises not from certainty, but from shared growth in the face of change.

In *Simple Takes a Wife*, gender roles are not merely background features but active forces shaping the lives and choices of the characters. The narrative examines mid-twentieth-century expectations of men as providers and women as caretakers, drawing attention to the weight of these norms within both personal and public life. Joyce’s character, however, pushes back against such constraints. As a working woman who asserts her independence, she challenges the domestic ideal of womanhood

that defined her era. Her presence complicates Simple's understanding of his own masculinity, particularly as he navigates the pressures and insecurities associated with his role as a husband. In their conversations, Hughes teases out the nuances of gender, revealing how these roles can serve as both sources of power and instruments of limitation.

Joyce, as a character, also embodies the particular burdens placed on Black women during this time. Though intelligent and ambitious, she ultimately relinquishes her dream of becoming a nurse in order to align with societal expectations of marriage and motherhood. Hughes' use of humour is sharp and deliberate, exposing the absurdities of such imposed roles while never diminishing their emotional and psychological cost. The dynamic between Simple and Joyce becomes a site through which Hughes explores the fragility of love and commitment in a world that systematically limits Black women's potential. In doing so, he highlights the ways in which personal relationships are inextricably tied to larger structures of inequality and cultural expectation.

At the core of the story is Simple's complex identity and his struggle with self-discovery. Though he appears easy-going on the surface, he harbours deep insecurities and fears, particularly the fear of being alone. His relationship with Joyce brings out both his vulnerabilities and his growth, showing how love can be a transformative force. Together, they swing and swim the ups and downs of marriage, which reveals the challenges and complexities of their relationship. Through these interactions, readers gain a deeper understanding of their personalities and motivations. The wedding ring symbolises love and commitment, but it also reflects societal pressures and expectations surrounding marriage. Another recurring motif is that of the train, which serves as a symbol of life's journey, representing the many paths individuals take and the changes they undergo. The train also symbolises progress and moving forward, a fitting image for the evolving relationship between Simple and Joyce as they lead their new life together. *Simple Takes a Wife* employs humour, symbolism, and incisive social commentary to examine the complexities of love, gender, and identity, providing a nuanced perspective on the African-American experience during a defining period in American history. Langston Hughes' skilful integration of these themes creates a narrative that is both rich and

poignant, while also reflecting on the ongoing struggles and triumphs of his characters.

Upon its initial publication in 1950, *Simple Speaks His Mind* was met with a mixed critical reception, setting the stage for decades of nuanced debate (Rampersad, 2004). Early reviewers often praised Langston Hughes' skillful employment of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and his nuanced, vivid depiction of Black urban life in mid-twentieth-century America. However, some critics raised concerns that the character of Jesse B. Semple (Simple), with his uneducated perspective and focus on everyday grievances, risked reinforcing reductive racial stereotypes prevalent at the time (Tracy, 2011). Despite this initial ambivalence and the controversy surrounding his representational strategy, Hughes' collection has since been recognized as a seminal and enduring contribution to American literature and social commentary. The character of Simple has evolved into an iconic cultural figure, emblematic of the resilience, humor, and profound insight that anchors much of Hughes' most celebrated work. The continued relevance and resonance of the collection are further attested to by its adaptation across various media, including stage productions and a 1980 television film (Tracy, 2011).

One particularly notable installment in the Simple series is *Simple Takes a Wife*, a story first published in 1953 in the *Chicago Defender*. The narrative, light-hearted yet poignant, has inspired numerous adaptations across media. Among the most prominent is the 1964 television film featuring Sidney Poitier as Simple and Ruby Dee as his wife. This adaptation was commended for its fidelity to Hughes' original vision and for the compelling performances of its lead actors. Another major interpretation is the 1985 stage musical, which showcased music by composer Charles Strouse and lyrics by Hughes himself. This production earned critical acclaim and introduced a new generation to Hughes' wit and lyricism. Collectively, these adaptations underscore the enduring charm and cultural significance of *Simple Takes a Wife*. The story's themes, centred on love, companionship, and the everyday trials of Black urban life, continue to resonate with audiences, affirming Hughes' lasting legacy in American letters.

In *Simple Takes a Wife*, race threads itself through every layer of the narrative, shaping the characters' decisions, their relationships, and the

world they move through. Simple, a Black man undergoing life in a society structured around whiteness carries the weight of racial perception with him in each interaction. His connection to Joyce, a white woman, invites a quieter tension into the text, one that doesn't erupt, but hums constantly beneath their conversations and silences. The novel attends carefully to the daily realities of racism, discrimination, and the ongoing search for belonging. Hughes does not generalize the Black experience; he places it in motion, allows it to speak for itself. His Harlem is not an abstraction, but a place with corners and faces, bars and apartments, arguments and laughter. It is in these details that Hughes sketches a portrait of Black life, not just its burdens, but its beauty, its endurance, its ordinary defiance.

Within the confined yet vibrant urban landscape of Harlem, the relationship between Simple and Joyce unfolds in ways both anticipated and profoundly revealing. Their bond, though perhaps not overtly revolutionary, is nonetheless subject to the persistent scrutiny of the outside world; while the community provides a measure of sanctuary, it never entirely shields them from societal judgment. The familiar neighbourhood bar, a recurring setting in Hughes' vignettes, functions less as a simple gathering spot and more as a communal stage where vernacular narratives are exchanged, social judgments are implicitly passed, and the identity of the community is forged through shared speech and collective memory. Hughes allows the authentic truth of his characters to surface not through overt political discourse, but through the unfiltered intimacy of private conversation; the way people speak to each other when they believe they are unobserved.

Hughes, whose extensive body of work spans poetry, prose, musical compositions, and public commentary, was committed to far more than simply documenting hardship (Rampersad, 2004). He possessed a keen and compassionate attentiveness to complexity, particularly concerning the lives of Black women in mid-century America. The character of Jess, for instance, emerges as a figure of fierce self-reliance and intrinsic strength. She is presented not as an exceptional heroine but as an authentic individual profoundly shaped by the pressures of her era while simultaneously and actively pushing against its limitations. Her refusal to comply with prescribed societal roles is portrayed not as outright rebellion,

but as a necessary means of personal survival and self-determination. Through Jess, Hughes demonstrates that the fight for agency is often subtle and persistent, manifesting as a quiet, yet deliberate, choice to live differently.

The enduring resonance of Hughes' work stems from his essential understanding of the emotional and political pressure under which people live. His characters, who wrestle with identity, relational fatigue, miscommunication, and profound love, are intentionally rendered as complex human beings, resisting reduction to mere political symbols. By creating literary space for these authentic, multifaceted voices, Hughes effectively expanded the landscape of permissible expression for all artists. His notable collaborations with jazz giants like Duke Ellington and Charles Mingus underscore his acute instinct for artistic forms that could "bend, stretch, and sing." Through an integration of language, rhythm, narrative, and improvisation, he masterfully carved out a literary space where literature, music, politics, and raw human feeling could speak directly to one another. That formidable legacy persists today, not as a static historical artifact, but as a dynamic, unfolding artistic necessity.

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