"With my sword in my hand."
THE POLITICS OF RACE AND SEX IN THE
FICTION OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON

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Rita Terezinha Schmidt, Ph.D.

University of Pittsburgh, 1983.

Even though the upsurge of interest in Hurston's works during the seventies was followed by concrete scholarly attempts to rescue her fiction from anonymity, the recently available criticism has not addressed, with thoroughness and comprehensiveness, those aspects that constitute the core of her narratives: the exploration of male/female power relations and the depiction of the female experience of oppression, particularly the black woman's, within the insular folk community.

Hurston's fiction brings into being a new way of appropriating the black reality by probing the question of female oppression at a time when the political content of sexual power relations was not yet fully recognized, especially in the black community. Thus, this study proposes a feminist reading of her fiction, a reading that focuses on the ways in which Hurston portrays the patriarchal relations of dominance and dependency in the sphere of intimacy; and on the ways in which her texts raise equations between sexual oppression and the assertion of manhood, between woman's subordination and the enslavement of a race and, between patriarchal oppression and white capitalist oppression.

Assuming that literary works cannot be disengaged from the social process and that the vitality and authenticity of the world they depict cannot be understood apart from the dialectical interchange between the subjective and objective, this reading articulates an adjacent three-fold purpose: 1 - to insert Hurston into the context of the Harlem Renaissance so as to understand

the relationship of the writer to her time, as well as to establish the ideological wellsprings of her fiction; 2 - to reinvent the links between her texts, particularly the short stories, history and personal reality so as to establish the determinants of race, class and gender on Hurston's literary self-expression; 3 - to liberate new meanings from certain narrative strategies, in particular, characterization, authorial manipulation and point of view, and to examine the emotional rapport of author/female characters, which will inevitably lead to the question of identifications. At this point, her works will be seen in terms of an ideological practice in which Hurston herself, as a subject, is inserted. The black feminism that emerges out of a synthesis of literary praxis and subjective reality intimates, ultimately, a level of political coherence between her fiction's racial expression and its thematic concern with female oppression.

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What I had to swallow in the kitchen has not made me less glad to have lived, nor made me want to low-rate the human race, nor any whole sections of it. I take no refuge from myself in bitterness. To me, bitterness is the under-arm odor of wishful weakness. It is the graceless acknowledgment of defeat. I have no urge to make any concessions like that to the world as yet. I might be like that some day, but I doubt it. I am in the struggle with the sword in my hands, and I don't intend to run until you run me. So why give off the smell of something dead under the house while I am still in there tussling with my sword in my hand?

Zora Neale Hurston, Dust Tracks on a Road

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INTRODUCTION

Until the full swing of the women's movement in the mid-seventies, the shadow of inadequate critical assessment hung upon the fiction of Zora Neale Hurston. Her works were confined to the sloughbin of erratic, over-simplified readings which either substituted a more thoughtfull and comprehensive evaluation by a discussion of her personality,[1] relegated them to the category of shallow minor fiction, representative of a woman's romantic point of view and, therefore, irrelevant to the lives of Black people ,[2] or considered them as a mere channel for Hurston's knowledge of black dialect and folkways.[3] Consequently, her works suffered, for a long time, from the effects of a sexually discriminatory critical practice which did not take her seriously because she was a woman, and from the threat of invalidation, on the part of a black male elite, because they overtly fail to document the social and economic reality of blacks in a white dominated world. Alice Walker, in an interview, voiced her opposition to the general negative estimate of Hurston: "Zora Neale Hurston is probably one of the most misunderstood, least appreciated writers of this century. Which is a pity. She is great. A writer of courage, and incredible humor, with poetry in every line."[4]

The fate of Hurston's works cannot be dissociated from the plight of a self-reliant woman who, doubly removed by race and sex from the dominant social order and the mainstream of culture, had the courage to pursue her autonomy as a woman and an honest self-expression as a fiction writer at a time when there was little public support and encouragement for a career woman, least of all if she were black. Not only did she face the social pressures of a male establishment that does not view in a

favorable light a woman who strays away from her traditional sexual role, but she also reacted against the point of view of a black minority according to whom the black woman intellectual should subordinate her feminist impulse to the broader concern for racial equality. From her early childhood in the all-black, self-governing community of Eatonville, Florida, to the sophisticated circles of the Harlem Renaissance of the twenties, Hurston displayed a strong sense of self.[5] She did not meet the social expectations of, and demands for, a female-typed behavior as well as she did not show any sign of having internalized her oppression as a black person. With little to count on but her resourcefullness and her determination to "jump for the sun," as urged by her supportive but, by then, deceased mother, Hurston emerged as a writer in a period of effervescent Negro consciousness-raising and, despite the unusual pressures stemming from patronage[6] and the distressing circumstances of her struggle for survival, she managed to write fiction and see her books published up to the forties. Because Hurston was a straightforward woman who always fought for her own space by openly defying the basic mythology of woman's subordination to man and by insisting on her point of view, indifferent to people's opinions, she was attacked during her lifetime.[7] And, as it could not have been otherwise, her reputation as a writer was damaged by a biased criticism that, on establishing certain limits of meaning for her works, either withheld significant aspects or left other aspects unappreciated, generating thus the misconceptions responsible for the diminished status of her fiction in the cannon of Afro-American literature.

With the upsurge of revisionist readings of women writers in the seventies, there has been an effort to rescue Hurston's work from anonymity as well as give them the serious critical treatment they deserve. It is worth mentioning here the essays by Addison Gayle Jr. in his The Way of the New World (1976), by Robert Bone in Down Home (1975), by Roger Rosemblatt in Black Fiction

(1974), and Robert Hemenway's literary biography Zora Neale Hurston (1978). In addition, there are the articles by Jay Walker, in Modern Fiction Studies 20 (Win. 74-75), Mary Helen Washington in Black World, 21 (Aug. 1972), Ann L. Rayson in Studies in Black Literature, 5 (Winter 1974), Ellen Cantarow in Radical Teacher, 9, and Lloyd W. Brown in Obsidian, 4 iii (1978).[8]

Insightful as it has been, the recently available scholarship has not addressed, in a comprehensive way, the central core of Hurston's fiction: the exploration of male/female power relations, mainly within the coercive structure of the patriarchal marriage, and the depiction of the female experience of oppression, particularly the black woman's, in terms of her socialization, her dependent status, her capitulation or resistence to the status quo, her limited range of experiences, the appropriation of her sexuality and labor, and, consequently, her reduction to "otherness," a concept implicit in the politics of domination by which woman is defined as an object for others, rather than a subject. Even though Hurston was one of the first black writers to consistently couch her fiction in the images and speech of the insular folk community, her writing cannot be appraised only in terms of its racial expression. Actually, her fiction brings into being a new way of appropriating the black reality in that it probes the question of female oppression at a time when the political content of sexual power relations was not yet fully recognized, especially, among the members of the black community.

From this point of view, this study proposes a feminist reading of Hurston's stories and novels, a reading that seeks to pay particular attentiveness to the ways in which her narratives handle the operation of patriarchy in the politics of intimacy; the ways in which she portrays the relations of dominance and dependency that enforces sexual roles and perpetuate the historical condition of the black woman's powerlessness; and, how the texts provoke equations: between female oppression and the assertion of manhood; between her

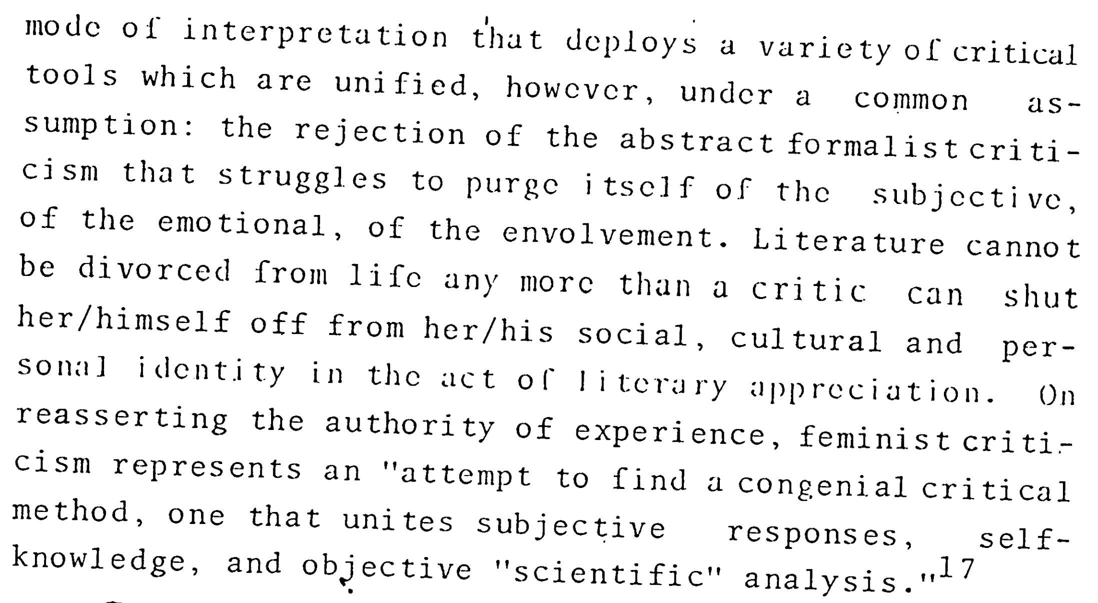
subordination and the enslavement of a race; between patriarchal oppression and white capitalist oppression. Assuming that literary works cannot be disengaged from the social process and that the vitality and authenticity of the world they depict cannot be understood but in terms of a dialectical interchange between the subjective and the objective, this reading purports to articulate an adjacent three-fold purpose: first - to insert Hurston into the context of the Harlem Renaissance so as to understand the dialectical relationship between the writer and the socio-cultural and historical moment as well as to establish the ideological wellsprings of her fictional practice./ The works by Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen and Jean Toomer will be seen as preparing the path that leads to Hurston's works. Second - to make connections, or reinvent the links between the texts, particularly the short stories, history and personal reality so as to reach some understanding of the dynamics of race, class and gender on Hurston's literary self-expression; to probe the question of a racial point of view inscribed in Hurston's treatment of the white woman's experience of oppression. And third - to bring out new significances from certain narrative strategies that advance the thematic strains of Hurston's works, in particular, characterization, authorial manipulation and point of view; to examine the emotional rapport of author/female characters, which will inevitably lead to the question of identifications. It is at this point that her works will be seen in terms of an ideological social practice[9] in which Hurston herself, as a subject, is inserted. All the issues outlined above are woven in the process of a close reading and descriptive textual interpretation that aim to establish boundaries of new responses to Hurston's works and, concomitantly, to question, revise, supplement or humanize what has been said about them.

Before laying out the assumptions that will make clear the critical basis upon which this study rests, it is important to clarify some of the terms that are

essential to its framework and which will recur throughout the work. The first of these is politics. Kate Millett in Sexual Politics refers basically to it as the principles by which personal contact or the interaction between groups operates. Ideally, politics should organize human life on an agreeable basis, but as it is known today, politics have to do with "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another."[10] The essence of politics is, therefore, power, legitimized by a prior consent that does not necessarily imply a consensus. Sexual politics, for instance, "obtain consent through the socialization of both sexes to basic patriarchal policies with regard to temperament, role, status."[11] By patriarchy, it is generally understood the rule of man. Its material base is the division of labor that structures the sexual hierarchy. Its ideological manifestations are buttressed by the myths and the stereotypes [the myth of woman's domesticity, or the stereotype of femininity that poses woman as made up of warmth, nurturance, passivity and inert ego, for example] necessary to maintain this hierarchy. It is a pervasive mode of power relationships that cuts across class divisions, different societies and historical epochs. The third and last term is ideology. Ideology, according to the concept developed by Louis Althusser in Lenin and Philosophy, is a representation of the 'imaginary' relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence.[12] As a body of values, ideas and images developed in the service of class interests in class society, ideology is not a representation of reality but a representation of that class' lived relations with reality. So, it is not something that can be counterposed to the real or equated with illusion. Rather, it exists and is inscribed in the way people live out their roles within a set of relations, practices and rituals which cannot be seen independently from the processes of social life. In agreement with Althusser's thesis that ideology is a practice that represents the construction of the indi-

vidual and is, thus, the basis for the individual's activity and orientation within the social structures s/he is inserted, McDonough and Harrison in their essay "Patriarchy and relations of production" explain that the "function of all ideology is to constitute individuals as subjects."[13] Terry Eagleton in Criticism and Ideology elaborates further. While asserting that "some ideologies, and levels of ideology are more false than others," Eagleton says that ideologies insert "individuals into history in a variety of ways, allows of multiple kinds and degrees of access to that history,"[14] becoming, thus, what Clifford Gertz calls "maps of problematic social reality and matrices for the creation of collective conscience."[15] As a signifying practice within the aesthetic mode of production, a literary work is embedded in ideology because it approaches reality in terms of social relationships, but it also produces ideology. On reconstituting the historical experiences of social individuals, it articulates certain content of consciousness, a certain view of the world that, in the process of a dialectical appropriation of reality, distances from the ideology which gives it birth and allows access to the structures of reality that that ideology hides from view, revealing, therewith, the text's relationship to history. As affirmed by Althusser "there is no practice except by and in ideology."[16]

In view of these assumptions, it can be quite simply stated that the present reading is ideological to the extent that it disavows a totally objective value-free perspective. As a practice, it is not a desinterested activity because it evolves out of a view of the world that includes fundamental questionings about how our societal system operates for woman and how our prevailing values feed the false ideologies that perpetuate the conditions that keep part of society doubly colonized. Such a way of seeing and approaching literature inserts itself under what has been named feminist criticism. Feminist criticism, today, is not a coherent system or a unified set of methodologies. It is a wide-ranging



mode of interpretation that deploys a variety of critical tools which are unified, however, under a common assumption: the rejection of the abstract formalist criticism that struggles to purge itself of the subjective, of the emotional, of the envolvement. Literature cannot be divorced from life any more than a critic can shut her/himself off from her/his social, cultural and personal identity in the act of literary appreciation. On reasserting the authority of experience, feminist criticism represents an "attempt to find a congenial critical method, one that unites subjective responses, self-knowledge, and objective "scientific" analysis."[17]

NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

[1] See Darwin Turner's comments in In a Minor Chord (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), pp. 90-98, and Nathan Huggins' in The Harlem Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 74, 130-133.

[2] This point of view is held by Richard Wright in his essay "Between Laughter and Tears," New Masses, (October 5), 1937, 21-25, and Ralph Ellison in "Recent Negro Fiction" in New Masses, (August 5), 1941, 22-26.

[3] See Alain Locke's essay "Jingo, Counter - Jingo and Us" in Opportunity, vol. XVI, 1 (Jan. 1938), 7-11, 27, and Andrew Burris' Review of Jonah's Gourd Vine in The Crisis, 41 (Jun. 1934), 166.

[4] In Interviews with Black Writers, John O'Brien ed., (New York: Liveright, 1973), 200.

[5] I am subscribing here to what Alice Walker says in her excellent Foreword to Robert Hemenway's Zora Neale Hurston (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978).

[6] Hemenway gives a detailed account of Hurston's life and work under the patronage of Mrs. Mason, particularly on pages 109-112 and 273-275.

[7] See Langston Hughes' comments in The Big Sea (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), p. 246.

[8] So far, there has been four dissertations on Hurston: Lillie Pearl Howard, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Non-Revolutionary Black Artist," University of New Mexico, 1975; Joyce Odessa Jenkins, "To Make a Woman Black: A Critical Analysis of the Women Characters in the Fiction and Folklore of Zora Neale Hurston," Bowling Green State University, 1978; Beatrice H. Royster, "The Ironic Vision of Four Black Women Novelists: A Study of the Novels of Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston and Ann Petry," Emory University, 1975; and Karla Holloway, "A Critical Investigation of Literary and Linguistic Structures in the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston," Michigan State University, 1978.

[9] Practice is defined by Louis Althusser in Lenin and Philosophy (London: New Left Books, 1977), p. 166 as "... the transformation of a determinate given raw material into a determinate product, a transformation effected by determinate human labour, using determinate means (of production)."

[10] Kate Millett, Sexual Politics (London: Rupert Hart-Davis Limited, 1969), 21.

[11] Millett, 37.

[12] Althusser, 162.

[13] In Feminism and Materialism, Annette Kuhn and Ann Marie Wolpe, eds. (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 17.

[14] Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology (Norfolk: Lowe & Brysone Printers Limited, 1976), p. 69.

[15] "Ideology as a Cultural System," in The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays. (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 220.

[16] Althusser, 159.

[17] Marcia Holly in "Toward a Feminist Aesthetic." Feminist Literary Criticism, ed. Josephine Donovan. (Lexington, Kent: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975), p. 46.

I - THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE: THE AUTHORITY OF EXPERIENCE

In May 1928, The World Tomorrow published an essay by Zora Neale Hurston where she stated with a lyrical forcefulness:

> 'Beside the waters of the Hudson' I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, overswept by a creamy sea. I am surged upon and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again.[1]

In this poignant image, the two important dimensions that characterize the work of Hurston, the fiction writer, coalesce: a sense of racial identity and the espousal of a strong self that resists the pressures of the external world. Moreover, if defines the parameters of her participation in the Movement which, spanning the decade of the twenties, is known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Acknowledged as a turning point in the evolution of Afro-American literature by such scholars as Arna Bontemps, Robert Bone and Abraham Chapman, the Harlem Renaissance designates a period of heightened race consciousness and self-discovery in the American Black community paralleled by an exuberant growth of interest in Negro life and culture on the part of the white intelligentsia, headed by Carl Van Vechten. The movement was the by-product of a complex interplay of historical and socio-economic factors, such as, the migration of blacks to the North, the social flux within the race caused by new economic opportunities and the rise of the black bourgeoisie, which altered substantially the texture of Black life in America. As the first major cultural event that was marked by the strength and resources of

Negro self-expression, it sought to assert the Negro voice as a real presence within the context of American culture. Known also as the New Negro Movement,[2] the Harlem Renaissance appeared on the American scene towards the end of World War I,[3] was publicly propounded and recognized by 1925 and felt the first signs of decline by the time the stock market crashed in 1929.[4]

It was a time when the Negro artist felt the necessity of interpreting his own group life without being hampered by the strong coersive influence which White culture had always exercised on his artistic pursuits. Also, it was a time when he began to challenge the notion that Negroes were incapable of contributing to the larger culture because of mental inferiority. These attitudes of independence and self-reliance gave rise to one of the main assumptions underlying the movement: by giving expression to the changes, values and cultural developments of Negro life, the Black writer could prove to Whites his qualifications as a cultural peer, without having to escape his blackness, and so, his humanness. Abraham Chapman affirms:

> It was an important movement because it was a landmark in Negro self-expression in America and because it was a movement that brought together Negro and White creators of culture, that began to open up the doors of general American literary magazines and publishing houses to the Negro writer and artist, a movement that encouraged the serious and objective study of Negro life by white Americans even though old stereotypes and distorted attitudes did not suddenly drop dead.[5]

The historical subsoil of the Renaissance begins with the migrating peasant, the vital element, according to Robert Bone,[6] for a comprehensive understanding of the revolution in Black consciousness crystallized in the movement. The Great Migration, the exodus of southern blacks to northern centers mainly in the period between 1916 and 1919, was responsible for bringing the Negro masses in contact with a new kind of social reality in the cities. Responding to the demand of industries for

cheap labor, the Black peasant severed the bonds that had tied him to the system of servility and dependence that characterized his situation in the South. With the relative sense of freedom that this new life seemed to afford, the migrating peasant felt an upsurge of optimism which was fed by a belief in the North as "a new frontier of racial equality."[7] His horizon expanded, opening up the chances for initiative and improvement.

However, this initial enthusiasm was soon to be undercut by a painful realization that he was still on hostile grounds fighting an embittered battle against racial discrimination. According to George E. Kent in "Patterns of the Harlem Renaissance,"[8] few blacks were accepted in labor unions, besides facing problems of housing and employment. Thus, the northern experience seemed to alienate the blacks further from the possibility of a life of respect and human dignity. In addition to that, the experience of black men in World War I also contributed to the growing disillusionment with American democracy. Coming back from the front, where they had been respected simply as men fighting for freedom, they were forced to reckon with the discrepancies coexisting in America, such as her democratic ideals and her system of institutionalized racism. The hostility between the group threatened in its supremacy and the group defiantly determined to earn its place in the sun, culminated in the 'bloody summer' of 1919. Discouraging facts such as these gradually lifted the Negro to a new level of consciousness about his racial identity. His sense of displacement, of 'not belonging,' was counterbalanced by a rising nationalist feeling that paved the way for the Renaissance. According to Robert A. Bone in <u>The Negro Novel in America</u>, the struggle for manhood suffrage in the early 1900's and the sense of manhood enhanced by the black's role in World War I, "passed on to the Renaissance generation as part of its spiritual heritage."[9]

In theoretical terms, the basis for the Renaissance rests "in the dialectical development of social and

political thought during the turn of the century."[10] The voice of W.E.B. DuBois in the Pan-African Congress in 1897 avowing equality and repudiating the models of Anglo-Saxon culture constituted a strong opposition to the philosophy espoused by Booker T. Washington, which had prevailed in the 1880's and 90's. Though his program underscored self-help and race pride, it subsided into a form of accomodation because it deferred any kind of confrontation with white America. DuBois' position foreshadowed a new development for Black's political and cultural thought.

Published in 1903, his book The Souls of Black Folk caused a positive impact on the new generation of Black intellectuals, among whom were Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and Countee Cullen. With a gritty perception, Du Bois renders the ambivalences and restlessness of being Black in America in a concept that was to become current during the 20's:

> ... the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."[11]

DuBois claimed that this double consciousness prevented the Negro from attaining a self-conscious manhood and ethnic pride. What he deemed as a solution for this feeling of conflict with the culture in which the Negro is inserted by force of historical circumstance, was a balanced merging of the two selves without allowing either to be irreversibly lost. In this sense, he believed that 'cultural dualism' was to be one of the everpresent forces from which Black art would gather a well of social energy and power.

The basic feature of DuBois' thought was his plea for a return to the folk as the only viable alternative

for the establishment of a Black art and culture. By 'folk' he meant the spirit of the race and its cultural manifestations in the rural South, where it had remained strong and unabated in spite of the long history of oppression. For him, the south was a regenerative place where the violence that has plagued black lives has become virtually a stimulus for blacks' will to live and fight back. DuBois' ultimate goal was social justice and to attain it he conceived of the 'Talented Tenth,' a Negro leadership of reason, intelligence and balance that would lead the masses to demand redress of grievances so that they would win their right to equality and achievement.

The Souls of Black Folk is "a milestone in the development of the racial awareness to which the literary self-confidence of the 1920's owed much of its being."[12] DuBois' prescient vision anticipated some of the issues that were later to generate many controversies among black intellectuals and around which the Renaissance built its inner dynamics as a full-fleshed literary movement. Among such issues were: blacks' imitation of white literary standards [suppression of racial elements] instead of a search for their own image; black middle--class achievement versus the aspirations of the masses; the materialism of northern urban centers versus the community of the rural south; and, last but not least, the question of art versus propaganda.

Another work that is considered as a precursor to the Renaissance is James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man, first published anonymously in 1912 and reissued under Johnson's name in 1927. In this fictional autobiography, Johnson probes with insight a theme never before broached in black fiction, that is, the psychological implications of double-consciousness in the life of a half-white musician whose conscious effort to embrace the heritage and culture of his mother's race collides with the unconscious impulse that propels him into the white world. In addition to that, Johnson delineates the mulatto's struggle for status

in the socio-economic structure of a rising black middle-class, making the novel an ideological channel for the projection of a racial paradigm that came to validate that class' image. On exposing the rift between the world of Blacks and that one of the mulattoes, Johnson supports the notion that the latter, indeed, constitutes a new class within the race, with more chances to reach the standards that would move them closer to white acceptability.

The novel's outcome, however, strikes a self-defeating tone when the protagonist willingly trades his racial heritage for the social accomodation and financial security as a white businessman. The belief in a culturally enriched past in America and Africa was shared, in spite of their differences, by both DuBois and Johnson. Their works helped to create the mood for the Renaissance.

Right after World War 1, there was an intense influx of blacks into Harlem that gradually transformed the ghetto into a race capital[13] with its own circles of emancipated intellectuals who came attracted by its unique milieu, its exuberant cosmopolitan profile, and effervescent nightlife. By 1925, Harlem was considered the largest Negro community in the world and the center of the cultural turmoil that was to give wide currency to the new spirit of racial protest and artistic self-consciousness, a spirit which itself stood at variance with what had been traditionally ascribed to blacks in America. Black and white artists and scholars, linked together either by their common black experience or by interest in Negro life, began to raise political, social and artistic issues related to its present reality, its goals and prospects. Individuals such as Langston Hughes, Arna Bonternps, Rudolph Fisher, Wallace Thurman, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay and Carl Van Vechten, among others, led by Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, W. E. DuBois and Charles S. Johnson made up a very heterogeneous group which did not subscribe to any particular literary credo but had made an unanimous committment: the necessity

to propose new ways of viewing the Negro that would, once for all, erase the image of the inferior race long crystallized in the course of the American caste system. The belief that the degree of cultural development of a people provides a critical perspective to evaluate its civilization undergirds their race-building standpoint.

The catalyst for the Negro activities in Harlem was the dinners sponsored by Opportunity [the National Urban League magazine] and Crisis [a house organ for the NAACP] whose editors Charles S. Johnson and Jessie Fauset, respectively, promoted contests among young writers and offered cash prizes for those who distinguished themselves in terms of literary achievement. It was through Opportunity that Zora Neale Hurston came to Harlem. As a former student at Howard University, she had joined the campus literary club and published her first short story, "John Redding Goes to Sea," in its little magazine, the Stylus. The story won her recognition as a potentially good fiction writer and she was recommended to Charles Johnson who was, at that time, encouraging young Negro writers to make their works public. When her second story "Drenched in Light"[14] was accepted by Johnson, Hurston felt it was time for her to embark on the pursuit of her long-time cherished ambition: a literary career. Arriving in New York in January 1925, Hurston was drawn into the vortex of the Renaissance, the artistic circles in Harlem.

No one more than Hurston displayed her race "in such a racy fashion," as Laugston Hughes describes her in The Big Sea. Amusing in a genuine way, "full of anecdotes, humorous tales and tragicomic stories,"[15] Hurston abhorred pretense in spite of being regarded as Barnard's "sacred black cow."[16] Not the least bothered with social conventions, her personality imposed itself in a nonchalant manner. It did not take long for her to be accepted among established artists at a time when black women intellectuals were very rare and had never before attained a degree of prominence in a context dominated by male figures. She had travelled a long

distance to become a 'New Negro', bringing to daylight scrutiny the genius in black soul as it was "seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination."[17]

The term 'New Negro' was first used by Alain Locke, Hurston's former professor at Howard and one of the major interpreters of the Renaissance, when in 1925 he edited a special Harlem issue of Survey Graphic, which was later in the year expanded into an anthology entitled The New Negro. The title was soon accepted to describe the new temper and attitudes of the black intellectuals who advocated a legitimate and natural Negro self-expression "delivered from self-pity and condescension."[18] It encompassed, therefore, both a racial attitude and a literary movement, as Robert Bone points out in The Negro Novel in America.[19]

The 'New Negro' was the actual materialization of what DuBois had voiced as the programmatic essence of a Renaissance, in his article "The Immediate Program of the American Negro", published in Crisis, April 1915:

> In art and literature we should try to loose the tremendous emotional wealth of the Negro and the dramatic strength of his problems through writing, the stage, pageantry, and other forms of art. We should resurrect forgotten ancient Negro art and history, and we should set the black man before the world as both a creative artist and a strong subject for artistic treatment.[20]

Locke's anthology, considered the racial manifesto of the 20's, initiated an argument that engendered an endless polemic on what the aesthetic orientation of the movement should be.

Locke called for a racially expressive art that would be integrated into the mainstream of an American Literature, which was itself striving for cultural independence and artistic maturity. He maintained that Negro art should move away from racial rhetoric and bombast, appealing attitudes that only served to address the group inferiority complex. Instead of a defensive

art disfigured by its extreme didacticism, Locke posited criteria based on the notion of a classical, vigorous realism not tainted by any requirement except those dictated by art itself. In his essay "Negro Youth Speaks," he affirmed that "race expression does not need to be deliberate to be vital."[21] The Black artist should, thus, set the primacy of artistic values over a calculated propaganda effect. He defined these values as material objectivity, discipline, technical mastery and distinctiveness. The motive of the artist "in being racial is to be so purely for the sake of art."[22]

From Locke's point of view, the source for authentic Negro expression was the folk and its traditional folk expression, which crystallizes all the qualities of classical art such as epic intensity, simplicity and versatility of thought, fine imagery and artistry of mood. His defense of folk material, however rooted in racial consciousness, is informed by a neo-platonic concept of art that demands the presence of the creative talent of the artist to transform the raw folk material into an art that fulfills the requisites of beauty and truth and, consequently, attains a broader significance. Even though Locke's criteria were not fully clear until he published his essay "Art or Propaganda" in Harlem I, november 1928, the germs for his idealism --an idealism that underplays substantially the negative forces operating on Negro life to the point of almost reducing experience into abstraction--were present in the first page of "Negro Youth Speaks:" "What stirs inarticulately in the masses is already vocal upon the lips of the talented few, and the future listens, however the present may shut its ears."[23]

Locke's major opponent was DuBois. DuBois contended that black writers had a moral responsibility to uplift the race by depicting educated, middle-class Negroes. Stressing black solidarity, he insisted upon "the loving, reverent comradeship between the black lowly and the black men emancipated by training and culture."[24] He did not question the importance of the rediscovery of cul-

tural heritage grounded in folk tradition in the making of the 'New Negro,' stressed in his own 1915 statement, but, more attuned to the historical changes in blacks' social experiences, he placed a major emphasis on the relationship between the writer and the black bourgeoisie from which the image of black advancement could flower.

The most pronounced feature of DuBois' divergence from Locke's position is related to the propaganda function of art. In his famous article, "Criteria of Negro Art," DuBois explicitly supports a socially-engaged black literature:

> All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda and gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.[25]

In the context of DuBois' defiant aesthetics, writing becomes a way of altering one's world, with no higher claim than furthering the interests of the race. For him, black literature grows out of a resistance to racial oppression and, consequently, cannot ever be separate from the social issues relevant to its struggle for liberation. Unlike Locke, whose objection to propaganda was based on the assumption that it only "speaks under the shadow of a dominant majority whom it harangues, cajoles, threatens or supplicates,"[26] DuBois firmly believed that propaganda is intrinsic to the function and necessity of art.

One of the problems raised by DuBois' position in relation to black achievement, is that he circumscribed artistic production to an educated elite who, supposedly, was to articulate the concerns of the race in terms of a broader social perspective. There was a tacit assumption that whatever degree of artistic recognition was attained by the advanced elements of the race, it would have positive effects on the whole group's social status. In this sense, DuBois' idealism camouflaged an attachment

to the class-view of the 'talented tenth', which raises skepticism about the extent of his committment to the folk.

In reality, the dispute between Locke and DuBois as to the parameters of Negro art is overshadowed, in the end, by their espousal of a cultural elitism that validates the class pursuits of a few and dissociates them from the concerns and goals of the larger black majority. There was a general consensus that the mass was inarticulate and that the role of the black writer was to express its race spirit, otherwise lost. On the other hand, [and here lies the contradiction and dilemma that permeated the movement] the black intellectuals tried to keep a good distance from the folks, for fear of reinforcing those very racist stereotypes they were supposed to repudiate, as for example, the comic caricature of the happy-go-lucky Negro, the sambo image and the Uncle Toms.

Langston Hughes, is his article "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," that came to be later known as the literary manifesto of the younger Renaissance writer,[27] addressed the necessity to move away from the middle-class consciousness. He vehemently criticized "... this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible."[28] Attacking assimilationism, the tendency of the black bourgeoisie to suppress their dark selves to eradicate cultural differences that would prevent their identification with the dominant majority, Hughes contended that it was absolutely necessary for the black artist to break free from the fatal influence of white middle-class perspective. Only then, would he be able to reveal the rich black image, and thus attain the status of a truly great Negro artist, "the one who is not afraid to be himself."[29] Hughes' commitment to full freedom of expression is summed up in his famous statement of June, 1926:

> We Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.[30]

Hughes was convinced that only the folk was the uncorrupted channel that could lead to an authentic delineation of the richness and complexity of black life. Emphasizing the freedom of the artist in drawing from its wealth of distinctive material and in endowing his art with racial individuality by means of the rhythm and warmth of the folk's heritage, Hughes was actually synthesizing both Locke's proposal for an art, radical in tone,[31] and DuBois' radicalism in purpose, while departing altogether from their bourgeois orientation. His iconoclastic attitude stemmed from the belief that as long as blacks are victims of the discrepancy between the American social creed and its social practice, the role of the writer is to immerse himself in the group tradition and to reflect its environment and background so as to nourish race pride and race consciousness. // Although Hughes did not address the question of how the folk was to sustain the artist nor developed any critical criteria for the evaluation of black literary achievement, his voice stood for an alternative within the movement. It gauged the scope of Negro nationalism: an urge to blackness within the race; a cherished separate group life; and an obstinate resistance to integration into the dominant culture.[32]

In this atmosphere of literary controversies and conflicting impulses that underscore the process of grappling with the problem of defining the voice and role of the black artist, Hurston's emergence as a writer is proof of the tenacious determination of a black woman to participate in the collective race-building efforts

undertaken by the Harlem intellectuals. As a woman, she was herself the living embodiment of the social changes that placed black woman side by side with the black man in the struggle for an equitable role in society at large. As a writer, her voice brought to bear upon her fictional practice the questionings and affirmations that DuBois had analytically considered earlier in the 20's. This requires some further explanation so that Hurston's position as a black female writer vis-à-vis the 'New Negro' movement can be better understood.

In 1920, DuBois published Darkwater. Though considered one of his minor works, it brought a new dimension to a most important issue: equality of races and of sexes. In the chapter "The Damnation of Women," DuBois examines the opportunities opened for black women as a result of the economic conditions, created by the World War I and their actual participation in the job market. In his point of view, this fact demanded a revision of sexual attitudes towards black women which would lead to an endorsement of their struggle against their imprisonment in a home where they were required "on pain of death" to fulfill their roles as wives and housekeepers. Emphasizing the practical impossibility of abolishing the new economic freedom earned by black women, DuBois states that "the uplift of women is, next to the problem of the color line and the peace movement, our greatest modern cause."[33]

In his realistic appraisal of the role of modern black womanhood, DuBois sidesteps the pitfalls inherent in the then-current cliché of the Negro woman as the brown dancing girl with her perfect half-clothed body and seductive eyes.[34] On approaching black womanhood as a great laboring class striving for racial and sexual equality, DuBois implicitly questions the male structure of authority and dominance that has kept woman in 'her place' by viewing her and treating her as a sexual object. Though his position illustrated a personal point of view, it offset the streak of male chauvinism that constituted

the psychological underpinning of black consciousness in the first decades of this century. Predominantly, blacks did not question the kind of society they lived in other than on the basis of racism. In Darkwater, DuBois called their attention to another form of oppression, less obvious but nevertheless at work in the midst of the black community. Hurston's fiction is a further expression of this particular point of view.

Her contribution to Locke's anthology was a short story called "Spunk," reprinted from the June 1925, Opportunity. This story not only represents a return to black cultural roots along the lines suggested in Langston Hughes' essay. It also epitomizes the development of a unique personal aesthetics that affirms the relatedness between personal and collective experience, artistic expression and racial consciousness, her perceptions as a black woman member of a racial male-dominated community and her fictional treatment of man and woman operating within the boundaries of such a distinctive milieu. "Spunk" carries the trademark of Hurston's works. It dwells on marriage and adultery while subtly suggesting the plight of the black woman through whom black men fulfill the expectations regarding their sense of manhood. The story's framework depends largely on the sharp delineation of the rural setting of a black southern community where folklife becomes the intensely vivid expression of a separate group tradition. Hurston's portrait of lower-class blacks evinces a form of resistance to middle-class values, a rejection of the acculturative process that flattens out cultural distinctiveness. In this sense, the story's racial point of view is very clear. But there is another dimension to "Spunk" that is not readily apprehended and can only be decoded in the process of analysis. Under its apparently deceptive surface, the story conveys a statement on the social practices that perpetuate distorted notions of manhood and, concomitantly, the desecration of black womanhood.

Hurston's story yields an insight into her distance from Locke's 'talented few.' First of all, Hurston did

not take stock in the current notion that black folk culture was a manifestation of black ignorance, a deviant behavioral adaptation to an oppressive reality. Undergoing formal academic training in Anthropology at Barnard, at the time, Hurston was well equipped to assess her personal experience from a positive angle. Anthropology, during the twenties, affirmed the existence of differences between the races which had their origins in culture, rather than heredity,[35] thus overturning accepted beliefs about innate differences. For Hurston, whose sense of belonging to a living folk community bestowed a peculiar strength to her approach of black culture, Anthropology offered a sort of validation for her efforts as a writer. Committed to maintaining the integrity of this culture which she had assimilated as rich, vital and more than a mere mechanism for survival, Hurston did not feel uncomfortable in writing about folk superstitions, omens and supernatural beliefs, even though, at times, a certain tension can be detected between the authorial presence and the reality being depicted. Holding aloof from the bourgeois orientation of the older generation of black intellectuals, who believed that a depiction of the proletariat did more harm than good to the race, Hurston was determined to explore the artistic possibilities of folklife material "without sacrificing it to the mythical American melting pot."[36] The fact that she herself never really identified with the middle-class[37] might well be one of the reasons why in her fiction she concentrates on the lower class the cultural dynamics of their group life and social relationships between the sexes, instead of on the confrontation between Black and White.

There are explanations, of a socio-economic nature, that help to clarify Hurston's allegiance to the southern black folk community. The increased opportunity and mobility experienced by blacks during the Great Migration and the period immediately following it, posed serious threats to the survival of the cultural patterns evolved in their close communal life in the southern segregated

community. Especially for the emerging black bourgeoisie who was engaged in a struggle to ascertain its identity as a class, the question of keeping alive the strands of consciousness that would enable it to define its blackness was a considerable challenging task that, many times, led to frustrations and conflicts. Failed attempts to live by the values of the white bourgeoisie in an effort to evade racial identity and a decisive break with the past leading to existential emptiness, form the kernel of the black experience depicted in Johnson's The Autobiography and Wallace Thurman's The Blacker, The Berry.

For Hurston, the simple, rural south was the vital physical and emotional space where blacks still could be themselves by allowing their personalities to emerge apart from the stereotypes imposed by a racist environment. Bearers of a cultural tradition that is informed by a pervasive sense of community and by the concreteness of a life close to the soil, southern blacks had the means of projecting an authentic image of blackness without self-pity, because instead of looking for identity in the white world, they could draw from within their own group the elements necessary for self-definition. They were not plagued by the sense of impoverishment and cynicism that, generally, assailed poor northern blacks "the result of the unfulfilled promise, the hope and dream that was not realized."[38] Richard Wright, in his essay "How Bigger was Born," voices what is also part of Hurston's misgivings regarding the North - its illusory sense of freedom:

> It was not that Chicago segregated Negroes more than the south, but that Chicago had more to offer, that Chicago's physical aspect-noisy, crowded, filled with the sense of power and fulfillment - did so much to dazzle the mind with a taunting sense of possible achievement that the segregation it did impose brought forth from Bigger a reaction more obstreperous than in the south.[39]

In these terms, it is not surprising that Hurston's

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experiential closeness to the folk led her to regard the south not as a place one escapes from, but as the ineluctable reality from which her fiction could draw its sustenance and vision.

A reading of "Spunk" does not suggest the presence of a detached writer refracting the raw, concrete folk material to mold it according to a normative parameter of universality. Its world conveys, in a vigorous naturalistic fashion, the articulateness of simple people whose lives seem to be dramatically traced by forces outside their control. Neither violent nor bleak in the pattern of black/white confrontation nor designed to make a favorable impression by showing the virtues of educated blacks, "Spunk" unveils a world largely unknown to the vast majority of Americans. It makes explicit the viability of a cultural alternative to the rational, materialistic America.

With this story, Hurston's aesthetics makes an alliance with the political and ethnical, espousing a stance of 'separate-and-unique,' which stands in stark opposition to the political philosophy of the Renaissance, best described as "conditional integration."[40] Hurston's point of view renders the 'race problem' peripheral in that it evades direct racial oppression to focus on the insular folk community. It confirms what she would later state in her autobiography: "I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject [the race question].[41]

There is one more aspect in relation to "Spunk" that must be taken into account in considering Hurston's departure from the positions held by Locke and DuBois. Her condition as woman gave her a vantage point and a particular frame of reference from which to probe the black reality. Because she had herself experienced what it was to grow up female in a self-contained male-oriented community, Hurston developed a penetrating insight into the identity and social rôle of the black woman held in a state of tutelage under male rule. Sensitive to the terms of what was both a personal and a collective experience, Hurston the writer does not seek to redeem

or idealize the black community but to show its shortcomings through the authorial inside view of the nature of its social relationships. "Spunk" evolves out of a concept of manhood, part of a whole structure of male domination, in which woman's potentialities to attain personhood are neutralized.

It is relevant to remark, at this point, that Hurston was writing about woman's oppression at a time when this issue was generally ignored and when the number one avowal of the Renaissance was the proclamation of black manhood. In one of the essays in Locke's anthology, "The Task of Negro Womanhood," Elise Johnson Mc Dougald states: "On the whole, the Negro woman's feminist efforts are directed chiefly toward the realization of the equality of the race, the sex struggle assuming the subordinate place."[42] Without withdrawing her allegiance to her race, Hurston was, however, suggesting a way of perceiving other aspects of the black reality that should receive serious fictional treatement. Overall, her fiction advances the question that sexual oppression has to be confronted before any other aspiration for social change can be successfully articulated.

Hurston's position towards writing as a productive activity was always informed by the perceptions of her personal experience as a poor black woman and as a member of the folk. Advocating a spontaneous art "that did not emulate a bourgeois world" but "that was true to one's instincts at the moment,"[43] Hurston was in fact, acknowledging the visceral bonds between art and experience. This is probably the reason why she felt distant from the aesthetic postulate of the 'New Negro,' summed up in Locke's proposal to lift "the folk gift to the altitudes of art."[44] The idea of 'lifting' conveyed an altitude of intellectual arrogance, a conscious detachment of the writer from the common run of Negroes, in short, a position to which Hurston could not subscribe, neither personally nor fictionally.

The search for an alternative outlet for the Negro voice culminated in the summer of 1926, when Hurston

along with Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman,[45] decided to produce a magazine of their own, Fire! It materialized out of the notion that "it would burn up a lot of the old, dead conventional Negro-white ideas of the past, 'epater le bourgeois,'"[46] Fire! was an act of liberation from the premise, rather naive, that the persuasive force of the 'better class' of Negroes, the white version of the white standard, would increase the Negro's prospect for acceptance in the American white society by serving "as living models of blacks's fitness for equality."[47] Fire's declaration of independence was to seize on the proletariat, the segment not yet tainted by the values of middle-class mainstream America. The group was too self-conscious of the implicit compromise in Locke's position and to a lesser extent in DuBois' approach, with relation to these values. To make their rejection a more significant one, they proclaimed their 'pure' aesthetic purposes, a radicalism perhaps meant to underscore their artistic freedom rather than to substitute the social function of black art for the art-for-art's sake attitude.

The proletarian tendency of Fire! inevitably led the group to explore the plight of minorities. Such is the focus of "Cordelia, the Crude" a story by Thurman which depicts a facet of a prostitute's life, or Bruce Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," where a homosexual speculates on his anomalous status. By far, the most remarkable work in Fire! is Hurston's story called "Sweat," about a married black washer-woman. Hostility, hatred and compulsion to violent action make up the power relations in a marriage doomed by its exploitative character. With a stroke of discernment, Hurston succeds in conveying the quality of male/female relationships as class relationships: the dominant and the oppressed.

The possibility of viewing individual phenomena such as the specific relations portrayed in "Sweat" in terms of a social experience, that is, the nature of marital relationship places woman in the category of a

class, the exploited and oppressed, gives the story its strength and points to its potential in forwarding a revolution in the aesthetic orientation of the Renaissance. Instead of giving priority to the theme of racial identity, "Sweat" focuses on the politics of intimacy, the power relations in the domestic life, the passive role allocated to a woman who is physically and emotionally abused by her husband but who can, by an act of will, reverse the scale of power and authority. It is a story that raises a woman's private experience to the level of collective reality. Black women, within the boundaries of race, are not immune to the reality of sexism.

This story offers strong evidence for the fact that Hurston was aware of the sexual politics that prevented woman from realizing her personhood and humanity. In this sense, she is not addressing just a private, individual reality but the social and collective reality of woman's plight in a patriarchal male-dominated context. To affirm that Hurston is not interested in social problems[48] is thus to misread the content of her art, as much as to regard her as an individualist is to mystify the unequivocal propaganda engrafted in her way of perceiving woman's reality and her struggle to throw off her conditioning.

"Sweat" illustrates the notion presented by James Weldon Johnson in his article, "The Dilemma of the Negro Author." Acknowledging the anomalous position of the black artist facing his double audience -- the white audience with its stereotyped ideas about the Negro and the black audience on a defensive against the critical treatment of Negro life -- Johnson wisely concludes: "... the artist achieves his best when working at his best with the material he knows best."[49]

Hurston's link with the Fire! group made more pronounced her committment to full autonomy for artistic self-expression. Thus, her fiction not only meant a rupture from the politics of dependence in terms of race, but it also meant a departure from the politics of de-

pendence in terms of sex. This means that, rather than emulating her male contemporaries in whose works characters were defined primarily as racial beings,[50] Hurston chose to downplay the notion of race in characterization in order to individualize the human subject in terms of his/her sex identity.

In this perspective, racial definition does not become the first and last reference for the character's identity. Race is the environment, the total circumstances within which the individual is inserted and is identified with a group with distinct racial and cultural traits. But sexual identity, male or female, is a condition of life which determines personal identity by assigning the individual's role within the group. This point of view is the starting point for an understanding of Hurston's works, the natural consequence of what she always felt and willfully states in her essay of 1928: "At certain times I have no race, I am me."[51]

Hurston's approach to character brought an important development for the image of the black woman projected in works of the Renaissance. As racial beings, the portrayal of black woman generally conformed to the myth of the exotic and sensual female, in reality a projection of man's perception of her sexuality.[52] It was a created image that represented a certain point of view, the male's and, consequently, it did not correspond to the perceptions and picture black women had of themselves. Hurston's departure from this externally imposed image is an attempt to redefine the black woman's reality within a context shaped, primarily, by the inequities of the sexual power structure that placed woman in a subordinate and dependent position, and secondarily, by the system of racism.

As a participant in the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston was not the only writer to create characters commensurate with the reality of black womanhood. Two other women, Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen, and one man, Jean Toomer, also explored the plight of the black woman and her relationship to the black community. While Fauset and

Larsen concentrate on her urban experience, which at once adds the elements of class and race as factors impinging on her self-definition, Toomer turns to the rural South to present peasant women, victimized by a conservative, patriarchal community, but also with the potentiality of becoming the survival principle of the black cultural identity. A close examination of their works and their relations with the cultural and literary assumptions of the Renaissance will establish the background that prepares the path for Hurston's fiction.

Jessie Fauset, one of the intellectuals who sponsored the movement as the literary editor of Crisis, explores the lives of mullato women whose social experiences and inner conflicts, in their struggle for self-definition, are marked by the disability of race and, also, by the disability of sex. Of her four novels published, three are the objects of our analysis.

There is Confusion (1924), Plum Bum (1928) and The Chinaberry Tree (1931), are novels of manners, set in the colored communities of Philadelphia and in Red Brook, New Jersey. Fauset's heroines enjoy the fact of belonging to the class of educated, refined blacks, the bourgeoisie, yet often stumble against the solid wall of caste and race prejudices, when they do not decide to cross the color line and move altogether into the white world. Such is the case of Angela Murray of Plum Bum who 'passes' to fulfill an urge to whiteness only to find out that the loss of racial identity throws her into a cultural vacuum that cannot ever be filled by the acquisition of the wealth and security she can enjoy as a member of the White race. Fauset's two other major characters, Joanna Marshall of There is Confusion, and Laurentine Strange of The Chinaberry Tree, do not relinquish their racial background but suffer a great deal from the prejudices of white people, and from the moral condemnation of illegitimacy on the part of the black people. In the end, they both succeed in rising above these obstacles to become representative elements of the new black elite.

Fauset's works are characterized by an uneasy ambivalence towards race. If on the one hand, Plum Bun's moral framework is an indictment of 'passing,' what Robert Bone considers an affirmation of "racial loyalty"[53] because it stirs nationalist implications, on the other hand, the other two novels suggest the narrow basis of Fauset's solidarity. Her insistence on the fact that upper middle-class blacks are only a darker version of the dominant majority because they lead a life of reason and culture and are as conventional as white Americans, seems a slap in the face to the majority of blacks who, fighting against racial oppression, resist the values of that very same class Fauset is so eager to identify with. Even though her novels allude to racial injustices with bitterness, her concern with the exclusive genteel minority of the race legitimizes the caste system and compromises a claim to racial loyalty in broader terms.

This duality of Fauset's stand on the race issue finds a parallel in her treatment of the question of sex, in particular, the sex-roles of her female characters. All her women are beautiful, strong-willed, independent and talented enough to pursue careers through which they achieve success and material security. Joana Marshall of There is Confusion becomes an outstanding singer and dancer in New York. Angela Murray of Plum Bun is recognized as a genuine talented painter and is awarded a scholarship in France, and Laurentine Strange of The Chinaberry Tree overcomes caste barriers and is accepted as an original fashion designer in Red Brook. As professionals, they exhibit the highest qualities of propriety, refinement and education, while respectability sums up the moral standard to be upheld under all circumstances. As human beings, they undergo profound emotional crises which are only resolved as they defer to the feminine role, letting, thus, their sense of self be thwarted by their total dependency on marriage, the ultimate female goal.

For Fauset, femininity -- the delights of passivity and the emotional dependency on the strong opposite

sex -- is the desirable end for her female characters. Yet, to assume that Fauset espouses her views about women in a straighforward, overt fashion is to underestimate her perceptions as a woman writer. Her characters struggle with themselves about what their roles should be and the narratives present strategies to make them solve their problems according to the values upheld by the social class to which they belong. The novels give the impression that Fauset herself was struggling to adjust her perceptions and aspirations to the narrow mind-set of middle class values she held dear.

There is Confusion,[54] a novel acclaimed by DuBois and Locke for its "Social perspective and social sanity"[55] on the delineation of the race situation, is an example of the problematic referred to above. Joana Marshall struggles between a career and a love commitment in full awareness that, in the present situation, both options are incompatible. Her determination to forsake love for the sake of her career is, at least for the time being, an alternative that gives her time to be herself instead of being engulfed by the demands of a household and children.

The narrator's attitude is frankly antagonistic to Joana's professional ambition. Interpreting her involvement in her art as "single-mindness" (p.176), the narrator twists the narrative movement from chapter XX on, in order to prepare Joana for an existential crisis from which she emerges regarding art as the narrator wants her to regard it: as an activity peripheral to the essence of life (pp. 233 and 284). Of course, the reader is then made to believe that Joana's final decision to sacrifice her career for love, marriage, children and male supremacy, is the only possible fulfillment for her being.

One of Fauset's critic says that "There is Confusion might have made a better narrative if Joana's determination had proceeded to its logical tragic end -- and Joana had not sacrificed her genuine ambition for a career to the happiness of spouse and children."[56] What he failed to note is that the narrative makes explicit

the reason that precipitates her sacrifice -- sex prejudice: "The theater companies will try a colored man in a white company, but never a colored woman" (p. 275). What is surprising is that Fauset's statements about black women's disabilities of sex and of tradition (p.234) are given 'a posteriori,' that is, after Joana's fate is consolidated by her acceptance of Peter Bye as husband, and not woven into the dramatic development of the narrative. Therefore, their narrative weight is minimal, becoming only a rhetorial exposition of an accomplished and irreversible fact.

The effect of the novel is disturbing. Fauset suggests that, in the present status quo of race and sex relations, there is absolutely no chance for a black woman to pursue an identity apart from the traditional roles of wife and mother. Yet, this awareness is practically undercut by the narrative's design, which fulfills the cultural myth about the nature and role of woman -the character's self-realization with the fulfillment of her biological through marriage.

In Plum Bun,[57] Fauset's stand on race and sex is more obviously attuned to the middle-class values she cherished. Angela Murray's trials and frustrations are a consequence of her belief in the myth that says that all the good things in life are white. Aware of her anomalous social position as a mullato, and also of her limited choices as a black woman, she is set on 'passing' in order to reach her objective: marriage, if possible, to a white man. Besides security, such a marriage would free her forever from the burden of race and caste prejudice.

However, Angela's search for freedom becomes a trap. Her world shrinks to her body, beauty and the charming of her lover: "... his pleasure was the end and aim of her existence" (p.203), "men had other aims, other uses but the sole excuse for being a woman was to be just that -- a woman" (p.204).

Her unsuccessful love affair brings her to the depths of guilt and despair for she loses her hope for

respectability. Fauset's puritan morality informs the plight of the character: virtue is a requisite for a good, financially respectable marriage. For the narrative to proceed it is necessary that Angela apprehend the meaning of her experience on moral grounds. Only then can she regain her status as a marriageable woman. Fauset facilitates the narrative turn with the strategy of a moment of consciousness, when Angela acknowledges her 'sin' and the importance of social conventions (p.228), which minimizes the impact of her sad realization of "The apparently unbridgeable difference between the sexes" (p.229).

The decline of Angela's personhood, from this moment on, is evident. As a character, she lives up to the ideal of femininity endorsed by her creator. Courage and strength give way to anxiety about economic insecurity, a longing for a sheltered life (p.233), where marriage becomes "the only, the most desirable and natural end..." (274). Her yearnings make her loneliness all the more unbearable. To make matters worse, she cannot forgive herself for having denied kinship with her dark sister for fear of losing her chance for happiness and status with a white man who only took advantage of her. Deprived of willpower and confidence, she is ironically unable to accept the love of Anthony Cross, a mulatto painter who offers her the respectability she longs for.

The announcement of Anthony's marriage to her sister awakens Angela's old dream: to be a successful painter. Determined to struggle for the mastery of her metier, she goes to France. A new life oriented towards goals and achievement somehow reconstructs her image as a self-possessed, independent and strong woman. Unfortunately, Fauset is unable to keep up this image, which is finally dispelled by a most flagrant narrative contrivance. The final scene depicts Angela face to face with Anthony. He was sent to her as a Christmas gift from the sister who had, at last, found happiness with her long-time black love.

There is little argument against the fact that the

design of Plum Bun was molded by Fauset's caste and class bias. Her intentionality in uniting mulatto with mulatto and black with black, is, in the end, a product of her politics of race. The prestige attached to lighter-skin individuals makes mulattoes more likely to be accepted by whites and, therefore, more likely to become a class that partakes of western refinement. In this sense, the novel's outcome seems to reinforce the American caste system which had been hardened along class and color lines.

Plum Bun illustrates Fauset's unsatisfactory response to the race question. She avoids coming to grips with the complexities of intraracial class problems and limits the thrust of her novel by making her characters settle for a 'normal' middle-class life within the color line. In spite of the novel's framework denouncing the practice of 'passing,' Angela does not assume her blackness for she does not envision, after all, any advantage "in throwing away the benefits of casual whiteness in America" (354). Implicit in this statement is the notion that the cultural ideal is still to emulate white values and standards of living. Angela's position reflects the social goal of the black bourgeoisie. It is appropriate that, in the last scene, she evokes the 'prospective' middle-class wife. As Addison Gayle Jr. points out in relation to Plum Bun"

> Pride in race does not mean that one surrender the white aesthetic, that he opt for the formula that Black is beautiful. The successful marriage from which all else might spring demands a union between like peoples, mulattoes with mulattoes, Blacks with Blacks.[58]

Laurentine Strange, the main character in The Chinaberry Tree,[59] is one of the weakest female individuals that populate Fauset's fictional world. Entrapped by the myth of mixed blood as daughter of an ex-slave and her white master, Laurentine lives under the shadow of her parents' sin in the exclusive Negro community of Red Brook. She epitomizes the image of the beautiful, edu-

cated mulatto who is marked by her racial group for her 'bad white blood' and illegitimacy, the most serious consequence of which is the loss of the man she loves. Completely marginalized by the social group, she is forced to settle for the hopelessness of a secluded life (p.62). To escape from boredom, she seeks solace in fashion designing, and, soon, exhibits a talent that wins her some recognition in the community.

For the reader, Laurentine is almost a parody of the feminine, though that was certainly not part of Fauset's intentions. One of the most terrible shortcomings in her character is her vanity, her emphasis on the sophistication of dressing, her efforts on the perfection of appearances. At times, she resembles a pitiful china-doll, given to crises of self-pity and disatisfaction and, thus, falls prey to the gossips of the community. She longs for marriage, a union that would mean a name, security and a turning key in the door of the past.

This possibility materializes in the figure of a light-skinned doctor, whose indifference to conventions cannot, however, surpass Laurentine's accomodation, her passivity and fear to take a step towards the consolidation of their relationship. At last, with a marriage proposal and a mutual agreement that she will give up her designing bussiness, Laurentine appeases her anxiety about who she is and finds herself as a woman and as a member of an ethnic community.

This novel is, in spite of some complications in the plot, a repetition of the novelistic pattern of Fauset's former works. This pattern of marriage, security and respectability between refined and educated mulattoes is a replay of her middle-class views on race and on women. Her female characters all comply with the bourgeois behavior code -- piety, purity, and concomitant frailty and helplessness, -- and succumb to a suportive role. Though endowed with great potentialities, her women retreat to the limited world of domestic life. Their dependency assures, thus, the hegemony of their partners,

in reality a matter of principle in the bourgeois economic reality. The idea that a man's life hinges on his work and that a woman's life centers on her man has been traditionally sanctioned by the bourgeois ideology. The possibility that a woman's work might justify her life is such a revolutionary stand that Fauset did not dare to take it because it would go against her middle-class education. One of her characters attempts an explanation for her situation as a black woman artist. She says: "'You can't fight and create at the same time'" (There is Confusion, p.354). Facing such a statement, the reader wonders what is creation if not a constant struggle to accomplish something, and what is a struggle without the anticipation of creation, of a goal?

The polarization of art and life, the arena of human relationships, that Fauset espouses in her novels, prevented her from endowing her protagonists with the critical thought necessary for them to raise and weigh questions about their condition, roles and alternatives, which would have projected them as effective literary models for the black woman in America. Overall, there is a fatalism lurking in the background of her works, a residual Puritan mentality that says that life is, in general, a moral struggle and that women are less equipped to confront its ordeals alone, necessitating thus, strong companions to guide and protect them, even from themselves.

From the point of view of the Harlem Renaissance, Fauset's novels were praised and her images exalted for offering an authoritative insight into "the upper strata of Negro life where responsibility, culture and breeding are the norms,"[60] and where black sex experience was not confined to "frank prostitution or careless promiscuity."[61] Clearly, Fauset's fiction subscribed to the ideas of Locke and DuBois, in that it was informed by the conscious desire to contribute to the advancement of the race. Her female images were easily assimilated by the mentors of the Renaissance for they conformed to the social ideals of the black bourgeoisie. They did not

question the status quo of sex-role relations and fulfilled the myth of the woman's place. They are an example of how Fauset's adherence to her values, incapacitated her to refute the social definition of woman as a private being. In a way, Fauset failed to develop an aesthetic practice consonant with the cultural identity of her race and with her relationship to it as a woman writer.

Nella Larsen, the first black woman to win the Guggenheim Award, drew the elements for her fiction from the same social milieu as Fauset, but, unlike the latter, she probed the psychological underpinnings of the impact of miscegenation upon the black woman's struggle for a definition of herself as a sexual and racial being, encompassing such questions as who she is, where she belongs and where she is going.

Larsen's fiction shows how skeptical she was of the policy of uplift endorsed by the black bourgeoisie. This policy captured the hypocrisy that pervaded the black middle-class with repect to racial issues as well as showed the servility with which it contemplated its acceptance in the ranks of the white world. On the other hand, Larsen did not view the folk as an alternative to solve the predicament of the Negro's search for definition in America. In her works, she shows that either reference group has the potential of becoming ideological straight-jackets, forcing upon the individual parameters that do not afford him the least possibility for self-definition apart from external images.

Larsen's strong feminine bias, and her concern with individual identity rather than group identity, made her particularly sensitive to the plight of the tragic mulatto woman, whose existence was charted by a wasteful struggle between self-hatred, the destructive touch of the color caste system, and the wistful longing that impels her to the black race in spite of her conscious efforts to deny it. Larsen's perspicacity enabled her to unveil the mulatto's self-destructive polarization of her divided inheritance and, consequently, her failure to find a proper channel for self-expression through the

layers of stereotyped images supplied by others. Unlike Fauset, whose focus is on the social aspect of miscegenation, Larsen probes the psychological afflictions of a race - divided soul, in a tightly - woven narrative infused with a rich imagery and dramatic intensity.

Quicksand,[62] probes the life of a bright, independent and solitary girl who, wrestling with her lack of adjustment as a black and with her resentment towards whites, wanders from place to place in search of an identity which, from her point of view, can only be conceived in racial terms. The tragedy of Helga Crane lies in her involuntary entrapment in the stereotyped image of the mulatto, controlled alternatively by her black and white blood and, therefore, by her inability to recognize her deeply emotional and sexual yearnings as a matter of her individuality rather than a fact determined by heredity.

From the start, Helga is haunted by vague yearnings which she is afraid of and automatically tries to repress. Dissatisfied with the monotonous life of self-satisfaction among Negroes at Naxos College, in a small southern town, Helga decides to look for her Danish mother's relatives in Chicago, where she experiences vexations and outrage because of her skin color. To overcome her humiliations and feelings of inferiority, Helga manages to go to New York, where Harlem represents an opportunity for smartness and enjoyment, characteristics of the gracious living of the black upper classes. For a while, she lets herself be enticed by the sophisticated world around her, for it gives her the illusion of happiness and material security. But its initial fascination is soon replaced by a bitter realization of the hypocrisy of Harlem socialites. Through Helga's observations, Larsen displays her contempt towards the middle-class Negro society. Its ethic based upon appearances, and its emphasis on status attained by material prosperity, reflected the degree to which this class abided by the values of the white majority.

Helga's hatred towards whites and hostility towards

blacks contribute to her myopic view of her own self. She cannot regard her sexuality in terms other than the anarchic expression of savagery, which, in her misconceived mind, binds her to the Negro race. The most memorable scene illustrating these perceptions takes place at a Harlem cabaret. On recognizing Dr Anderson, the former director of Naxos College to whom she was physically attracted, dancing with another woman, Helga is completely overtaken by a sweeping émotion over which she does not have any control. Ascribing these quiverings to her black blood, Helga is determined to escape from what she senses as something alien: "She wasn't, she told herself, a jungle creature" (p.127).

An unexpected gift frees her of financial worries and enables her to go to Denmark where she hopes to find peace of mind. She could not have suspected that she would be regarded as a prototype of the sensual African woman. Wooed by a Danish painter who explores her features in a grotesque portrait, Helga seems to perceive, for the first time, the damaging effect that racial stereotype has inflicted upon her sense of self. At the same time though, she is disturbed by intimations, distorted as they are, that she is after all, a sensual being for she misses everything Negro: "'I'm homesick, not for America, but for Negroes'" (p.207). What she takes for self-knowledge is, in fact, a reorientation of her sexuality towards a surrender and self-effacement in racial ties.

Returning to America with an eagerness to belong, Helga meets, by accident, Dr Anderson. Now married to one of her best friends, Anderson turns down Helga's invitation for an affair after having kissed her passionately, in an incident which leaves no doubt as to the nature of Helga's restlessness (p.233). Intentionally, Larsen omits any explanation of Anderson's attitude, as if to freeze his image in 'bas relief:' the image of a deceptive man whose ambiguous signals are aimed at confusing the woman who, in her turn, without questioning the real nature of his intentions, falls in the trap and

then is left in the lurch. The scene leaves the reader with a bitter taste of woman's vulnerability, implied in Larsen's suggestion of how man's conscious use of his sex appeal can be a subtle form of oppression.

The link between this episode and Helga's final ordeal must necessarily be made in order to consider the full extent of Anderson's deception. After her meeting with Anderson, Helga's feelings of isolation from all human beings are intensified. She starts wandering again, seeking release for her repressed emotional and physical needs. Finally, on a rainy night, she falls prey to a fundamentalist traveling minister whose obscure religion and wild ritualistic practices offer the "anaesthetic satisfaction for her senses" (p. 264). Her subsequent marriage to Reverend Green and their settling down in rural Alabama, fits in with Helga's romantic expectations about the simple happiness of the poor black folk. Yet, her self-deception is sharply captured by the narrator. Her unflattering description of Green's physical traits (p.271), their poverty and ugly life of toil, makes clear the gap between the narrative's point of view and Helga's. Her sensual gratifications become a continual strain of childbearing, which added to the excess of housework, finally succeed in dragging her into what the narrator sees as the quagmire of her own making (p. 296). The reader cannot fail, at this point, to note a deep incongruity in Helga's situation. In the past, she had heartily disapproved of marriage because it entailed the procreation of second-class citizens, "'More black folk to suffer indignities,'" (p.164) "'More dark bodies for mobs to lynch'" (p.231). Now, she is engrossed in a marriage relationship that gives her nothing but repeated pregnancies, exhaustion and illness. At once, a question arises as to what kind of relationship she entered into that was so effective in neutralizing her convictions.

The problem with Helga is that she cannot get rid of her sense of guilt, that is, the feeling that she brought her fate upon herself. Although she dimly perceives the origin of her present oppression, especially

when she questions the morality of her marriage (p.296), she continues to blame herself for the situation. She is aware of her roles as breeder and labourer, what she ironically perceives as responsible for the "naturalness" of women's health (p.279), but she fails to link these roles to the roots of her oppression. Lacking consciousness of her situation as a woman, she tends to view her sexual predicament in racial terms. She is a Negro for whom life altogether is a disappointing affair (p.290).

Helga's search for identity ends, thus, in anguish and helplessness as she is forced to obliterate her individuality to fulfill her biological function. Escape is out of the question because she cannot even consider deserting her children. Ironically, it is her sexuality that leads her into her ultimate self-debasement, the violation of her womanhood. The narrative ends with Helga's defeat at the moment of conceiving a new life: "And hardly had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned home from the homes of neighbors, when she began to have her fifth child" (p.301).

As a statement of Helga's condition within the context of a marriage that reduces her to biology, these lines reveal Larsen's special sensitivity to questions related to the status of black woman, the limited choices for self-fulfillment in a sexist and in racist society, and, in particular, the harmful effect that racial images, once internalized, have in her perceptions of her own needs. Helga's subjection to Green and his coarse animality is a result of her inability both to understand the nature of her impulses and to find the proper channels for their expression. This inability is a psychological response to her exposure to the stereotyped image that equates blackness with sensuality and primitive drives.

Larsen's criticism of rural Negro life--the narrow-mindedness, prejudices and hostilities of the folk community--makes it hardly the alternative lifestyle to

the hollowness and imitative values of the black middle-class. Robert Bone in The Negro Novel in America says that Larsen indicts the folk culture as a "threatening swamp."[63] In fact, in Quicksand, Larsen repudiates both the bourgeois and the folk worlds, creating an impression of social uprootedness that symbolically coalesces in the recurrent images of confusion, suffocation and in the unifying metaphor of quicksand.

Passing,[64] Larsen's second novel, presents a perceptive study of the differences in the personality of two black women whose attitudes on race have led them to embrace different lifestyles and whose lives criss-cross at a crucial moment, with disastrous effects. Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry are beautiful, refined mulattoes who relish the accouterments of middle-class living, and also epitomize the feminine ideal required by their social position. They "are intelligent enough in a purely feminine way" (p.160). As racial types, they exhibit a divergent approach towards their heritage. By rebuking 'passing' as a risky business but without disguising her fascination for such a choice, Irene has responded positively to her blackness and married a Negro professional. Tranquil about the domestic stability she arduously conquered, Irene abhors any possibility of change. She upholds the basic premises of middle-class economic reality: her prominent marriage affors her security, status, comfort and a pleasant life centered on her family. Conversely, Clare who chose to pass by marrying a white man ignorant of her ancestry, seems to accede cheerfully to a life that thrusts her into a constant danger of being found out. Incisive and aggressive, almost ruthless in temperament, Clare channels all her efforts to preserve her social status, which depends on her ability to conceal her true identity. A chance encounter in Chicago brings these two markedly different personalities together.

In spite of the glamour and vivacity that flows from Clare's personality, she confesses her loneliness in the white world, her longing to associate with blacks,

and, almost affectionately, presses Irene to receive her in her Harlem home, on those occasions when she would manage to escape from her husband's surveillance. Irene consents but, intuitively, senses a very tangible threat in Clare's encroachment into her private life. Her keen understanding of Clare's strained situation cannot submerge her sexual jealousy of Clare, whose charms gradually begin to affect Irene's husband, Brian Redfield.

In contrast to the tightly-written narrative of Quicksand, Passing shows a lack of cohesiveness in the focus of the narrative, as if Larsen suddenly decided not only to deal with the psychological underpinnings of 'passing' but also to expand her focus to encompass the maze of feelings and ambivalent intentions of a woman who does not experience insecurity in racial but in sexual terms. Regarded as a failure in thematic unity,[65] Passing nevertheless discloses Larsen's perceptive grasp of the interrelatedness of personal and racial problems. Irene's confidence and self-satisfaction with a marriage that she definitely takes for granted, were bound to fall in disarray if Larsen were to fully exploit the dramatic tension antecipated by the encounter that takes place in the first part of the novel. From this point of view, the shift from Clare's 'passing' and desire to renew her racial ties to Irene's defensive actions to safeguard her marriage emerges as a natural necessity of the plot.

The key to the narrative structure is given by Irene's dilemma. She struggles between her own personal interests and racial loyalty (p.181 and p.184). Though threatened by Clare's presence, she is reluctant to betray her and disclose her friend's secret to the husband. As Irene tries to find a solution to the situation, it suddenly dawns on her that there is a very concrete possibility that Clare, once free of her deceptive marriage, will turn to Brian. Gradually approaching the verge of despair, Irene entertains evil thoughts about her rival's fate. The denouement is shocking, but not totally unexpected. Without the gloss of sentimentality,

Larsen creates a realistic scene appropriate for the outcome of this domestic tragedy. Coming to know her wife's ethnic background, Mr Kendry suddenly appears at a party she is attending, and confronts her. Irene impulsively rushes to the couple: the next moment, Clare is thrown out of the window and is instantly killed. The ambiguity in the description of the incident is obliquely dispelled by the narrator's comment on Irene's reactions. She "struggled against the sob of thankfulness that rose in her throat" (p.2...).

A critical approach to Passing must necessarily explain the intricacy of Larsen's design. Clare is, from the beginning to end, the 'tragic mulatto' whose portrait never emerges in a full delineation of her personality except as a solitary racial type precariously seeking to renew her bonds to the race in order to escape the emptiness of a social pretense. Though the narrator views her situation with understanding, at first, there is no attempt to interpret or justify her dubious behavior and intentions towards Irene. Clare remains always distant, untouchable and inconsequent, playing a double game [racial and sexual], more for the sake of running the risk than because of a serious committment to self-definition.

From the point of view of the narrative, it is Irene who suffers a real transformation. From a passive observer of Clare's "cat-like" temperament, Irene changes into a fierce and resentful woman, fighting for what she believes to be her rights to love and happiness. She is so wound up in her own feelings of jealousy that she fails to perceive that her marriage is deteriorating, partly because of her own inflexibility and selfishness. In spite of knowing that Brian, her husband, is unhappy with the smug and self-indulgent professional environment in New York and would like to move out, Irene presses him to stay so that she can go on enjoying the benefits that her class position affords -- property, family, material comfort and social status -- in the best American style.

Larsen's view of the interweaving of racial and personal motives in the tragic fulfillment of the mulatto's destiny is realized at the end of the novel. But the end is not a satisfying one, not to say disappointing, for two reasons. First, the dilemmas between racial loyalty and individual interest as well as between 'passing' and assuming one's blackness that constituted the thematic strain of the narrative are not resolved but abolished by a sudden death. Second, the final scenes generate another problematic that lies outside the scope of the novel, that is, the question of Irene's tragedy, her terrible moral predicament at the moment when Clare's fate is sealed. This problematic leaves the reader somewhat confused about what is really Larsen's point of view.

On the whole, Passing seems to be an excuse for Larsen to expose the shallowness and superficiality of the black bourgeoisie, and, especially, of the black women who, caught in the net of the bourgeois economic reality, squander their potentialities in a one-dimensional pursuit of security and status through a good marriage. Unlike Fauset's world, Larsen's is bleak and attests to the degree of her detachment from the black elite in spite of her urban middle-class experience. She projects in her fiction a sense of cultural loss, of being cut off from one's racial and cultural roots. Ironically, alternatives lead nowhere, except to drown the black individual further in confusion and despair.

Significantly, it was a male writer who, in the 20's, explored the image of the black woman from an angle commensurate with the historical and cultural experience of the race. Avoiding the traditional image of the urban upper-class mulatta, Jean Toomer turned to the southern soil where the black woman, beset by the effects of racism and sexism, represents the force of endurance and survival for all living under oppression and exploitation.

Jean Toomer's Cane,[66] "the most impressive product of the Negro Renaissance,"[67] represents a full-scale

quest for ethnicity, for the material out of which the distinctiveness of black life flowed to become the source of the race's determination to exist. Without catering to the demands of racial chauvinism, Cane bolsters the belief in the necessity of evolving a racial paradigm that would fuse past reality and present meaning if blacks were to affirm the cultural viability of the race's image.

Cane is a lyrical rendering of Toomer's quest for the racial roots of a people who have always remained attached to the land. Its circular symbolic structure is divided in three parts, each woven together by poetic images of an intense evocative power, comprising a journey which begins in the red dust of Georgia's canefields in part one, moves to Washington's crowded Seventh Street in part two, and ends with a return to Georgia in part three. Each section contains a series of sketches of men and women whose lives are, one way or other, touched by the drama of racial and sexual oppression.

It is of paramount significance that Cane should begin with the portraits of peasant women. Part one reveals Toomer's immense sensitivity towards the texture of lives truncated by sorrow yet still palpitating with a fathomless necessity of being. By living close to the natural world, all women merge and become one with the surroundings. Karintha is "as innocently lovely as a November cotton flower" (p.1). Carma's face is a sunflower and Fern's eyes are a river. Becky is like the pines in the autumn sun whispering to Jesus and Esther's hair "looks like the dull silk on puny corn ears" (p.23).

Essentially, they are earth-women, images that crystallize the primitive power of an elemental reality, timeless and spaceless in the confines of a canefiled. They suggest the quintessence of creation, growth, change, process that thrives from an organic relationship with the soil. At the same time, they evoke their connection with the Dixie Pike which "has grown from a goat path in Africa" (p.10). The shadow of past oppression insidiously intrudes in their lives, leaving bare their

vulnerability to male power. Helpless as the land against abuse and violence, their selves have been numbed by the remnants of slavery which persist in the form of sexual exploitation and racial discrimination. Either debased by men -- who possess their bodies, violating their humanity -- or marginalized by society's prejudices and moral sanctions, these women live at the edge of meaningful existence. Victimized by their female condition, they take up their sexuality as the sole outlet for expression. So, there is Karintha, a growing thing ripened too soon who carries the guilt of seeing her fatherless child fall "out of her womb on the bed of pineneedles in the forest" (p.2). Becky, the white woman who bore two Negro sons, lives as an outcast and dies a solitary death as the chimney of her cabin collapses and buries her under its bricks. Carma, full of life and strong as a man, has many lovers and drives her husband to murder. Fern, bearing the marks of her Jewish father and Negro mother, falls into a catatonic state after having bestowed her body on men who fooled themselves about what her eyes longed for. Esther, plagued by her white complexion and curbed by her father's social prominence, centers her sexual and religious fantasies on a virile black preacher. Humiliated by his rebuff and realizing, then, how grotesque he looks among the town prostitutes, she withdraws into herself and becomes a somnambulist to whom "there is no air, no street, and the town has completely disappeared" (p.25). At last, there is Louisa, the pivot of a southern interracial sex triangle whose mind collapses after experiencing the horror of a lynching scene. She now sings to the blood-burning moon.

Pathetic as they may be in their thwarted lives and facing the misfortunes arising from their gender identity and racial heritage, these women emerge as figures invested with a powerful cumulative impact: the impact of a quiet and soft humaneness that stubbornly dwells in the recesses of their muteness and madness. On relinquishing their places in the alleged sane, rational so-

cial group, they subvert this very same order by becoming the living scars that point back to the system's oppression and denial. Their racial and sexual identities lie outside the realm of social definitions to integrate the texture of the southern natural world: the dusk, the wind, the sunset, the earth, and the open spaces.

In opposition to part one, part two focuses on Black's northern experience, their apartness from nature and their confinement in an urban materialistic world which cripples their potentialities for growth and neutralizes their blackness. The succession of images like houses, tree boxes, alleys, saloons, theaters and nightclubs becomes a pervasive symbol for a claustrophobic artificial environment where black women and men defer to white mores, the result of which is their alienation from themselves and from their race. Avey, for example, is like a tree planted in a box along V street and whose face does not show "the gray crimson-splashed beauty of the dawn" (p.47). Muriel's values converge to a mask of appearances while Robert cannot break free from the hassles of ownership which gradually drag him to the edge of schizophrenia. He "wears a house, like a monstrous diver's helmet, on his head" (p.40). John and Paul are intellectuals who suffer from the inadequacy between their emotional needs and the power of their minds. The former sublimates his physical desire into an abstract dream and is reduced to a living shadow. The latter succumbs to a perverted perception of his double identity. By letting his 'whiteness', his analytical mind, prevail over his emotions, he shatters his chance for happiness.

Uprooted and divorced from a context that would give them a sense of self-validation, these characters cannot come to terms with their racial ties and so resolve their impasse by violating their inclinations and inward feelings. The self-defeating quality of this attitude is clearly emphasized in all the sketches, by a narrator overwhelmed with the pain of frustrations and loss.

Part three is the narrative of Ralph Kabnis, a school teacher from the north who returns to rural Georgia in an effort to recover his black identity. Incapable of confronting the past in any light other than the debasement and subjection of his people to a sub-human condition, Kabnis recoils from the race's history, that turns him into an alien in the southern soil. His uneasiness with the natural elements stirs a struggle to dull within himself the voice that claims kinship with the land and the folk. Repressing all the emotions that the land awakens in him, Kabnis, the sane skeptical man, is reduced to something as intangible as "a promise of a soil-soaked beauty, uprooted, thinning out. Suspended a few feet above the soil whose touch would resurrect him" (p.96).

Ralph Kabnis epitomizes the neurotic black consciousness of the north, incapacitated to apprehend the scope of his race's experiences. He operates on the basis of self-hatred, that is, his perception of black southern life is filtered through the lens of white racism. The outward hostility he feels towards whites is internalized and he begins to direct this hostility towards himself, the object of white's hatred. This inverted perspective on his blackness and, by implication, on his racial reference group, blurs his vision of the past and prevents him from an objective appraisal of the race's history. To be objective implies to reach an inclusive understanding of the awesome truth of the race's oppression and the Blacks' long tradition of endurance and strength evolved from their unremitting attachment to the land. Kabnis' refusal to admit any feelings towards the physical space that surrounds him is a refusal to embrace the pain and the beauty of the south and, consequently, a denial of his racial identity. His alienation is further manifested in his moral degradation, his total withdrawal from the world of meaningful social relations. In the last scene a dark cellar, a mock-copy of the home he sought, provides the last retreat for the man who intoxicates his senses with liquor and sexual

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debauchery to obliterate his roots and identity.

In the doomed world of Kabnis, all is not darkness and despair. There is hope and it rests on a young woman, which illustrates the significance Toomer attributed to the role played by black woman within the black community. She resembles the women of part one, but she also distances herself from them because, aware of being a member of a social group, she meets her responsabilities with dignity and determination. She represents, thus, a movement away from the purely sensual towards the ethical, an element that completes the circular pattern of the narrative but, at the same time, transcends the bleak circularity of Blacks' history of oppression.

Carrie Kate is the humanizing element that functions as a foil to Kabnis' ruthlessness. Compassionate and sensitive, her task is to take care of the old Father John, who represents the last vestige of black folk culture, the living connection between past and present, now mentally disturbed and confined to a work-shop cellar. Though already showing signs of the harsh southern life on her face "now touched sullen, bitter. Her rich beauty fading..." (p.101), she is the possibility of mediation between two compartmentalized forms of black experience: the folk culture of the past embodied in Father John and the uprooted consciousness of the present represented by Kabnis. Her capacity for mediation is linked to her closeness to the land, the black cultural matrix out of which could emerge an uncorrupted black identity. Toomer's treatment of Carrie Kate is a redefinition of the role of the black woman, a redefinition that avoids the narrow scope of the traditional equation: woman/nature/biological continuity. The description of her looks nurtures no doubt as to her central role in conveying Cane's point of view: "She is lovely in her fresh energy of the morning, in the calm untested confidence and nascent maternity which rise from the purpose of her present mission" (114).

Cane was praised by DuBois and Locke for its sexually emancipated characters who defied "our sex conven-

tionality."[68] Considering their middle-class perspective, this is, no doubt, an interesting statement. But they failed to apprehend both the link that Toomer establishes between expressions of sexuality and oppression and the role he assigns to black woman as a potential key element in the reconstruction of the ethos of the race.

Toomer's rebuke to the industrialized North responsible for the process of acculturation that suppressed the black identity and his plea for a return to the soil as the only viable alternative for self-validation, articulates a functional reality for the survival of the race. For blacks to revitalize their identity, they must know that they come from somewhere, they must consciously appropriate the race's history, deeply embedded in the Southern soil. In this perspective, the south is the home basis for the black community.[69] Cane leaves it clear that distance from the rural south means, for blacks, a surrender to middle-class mentality and white values.

From the point of view of the Harlem Renaissance, the search for the black heritage undertaken in Cane was a new turn in the development of Black fiction that challenged the position of the black bourgeoisie. Rather than a commitment to racial equality, Cane embodied the distinctiveness of the race, dismissing the bourgeois platitudes that split racial experience into the respectable and the lowly, and, accordingly, judged its suitability for the literary medium. Therein lies one of Cane's most refreshing qualities. With a certain degree of radicality it asserted, as racial expression, a value system dissociated from the genteel spirit of the movement, sidestepping, thus, the limitations that the polatization art/propaganda impinged on the black writer of the 20's.

In general terms, the works by Fauset, Larsen and Toomer attest to the wide range of tendencies of the Harlem Renaissance. They illustrate the direction for Negro writing advocated by Hughes in his manifesto and they express the shifts identified for the period by

Robert Bone in Down Home, "1-from cosmopolitan to parochial values; 2-from cultural assimilation to the celebration of ethnicity; 3-from the norms and standards of the white middle-class to the folkways of the black community and 4-from definition of the dominant majority to self-definition."[70] This movement meant a break with the practices that perpetuated cultural subordination, engaging the black writer in a conscious and responsible confrontation of his heritage.

In more specific terms, the achievement of Fauset, Larsen and Toomer in a "time of uprooting and re-rooting"[71] as Abraham Chapman defines the 20's, represented a gradual attempt to interpret the searing reality of the black woman in a way that would illuminate her as a sentient being in a social structure shaped by racial and sexual oppression. These writers, in their creative effort to construct the cultural image of the black's growing sense of peoplehood, advance in their works the ideological coordinates upon which Hurston's fiction articulates its relationship with the black reality: the openness to the group's ethnic experience embodied in the marginalized black folklife, and the questioning of the black woman's place in a male-dominated and male-oriented socio-economic context.

NOTES TO CHAPTER I

[1] Zora Neale Hurston, "How it Feels to be Colored Me," The World Tomorrow, 11 (May, 1928), p.216.

[2] According to Robert A. Bone in The Negro Novel in America (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, Inc, 1958), p. 57.

[3] Arna Bontemps, "The Awakening: A Memoir" in The Harlem Renaissance Remembered, Arna Bontemps, ed., (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1972), pp. 1-2, and Robert Bone The Negro Novel in America, pp. 54-59. According to the former, Claude McKay's poem "Harlem Dancer," published in 1917, planted the seed of the Black Renaissance.

[4] According to Amritjit Singh in The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), p. 3.

[5] Abraham Chapman, "The Harlem Renaissance in Literary History," College Language Association Journal, III, nº 1, (Sep. 1967), p. 44.

[6] Robert Bone, Down Home (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), p. 116.

[7] Robert Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 37.

[8] George E. Kent, "Patterns of the Harlem Renaissance," in Blackness and the Adventure of the Western World, George Kent ed. (Chicago: Third World Press, 1972), p. 20.

[9] Bone, p. 57.

[10] Warrington Hudlin, "The Renaissance Re-examined," in The Harlem Renaissance Remembered, Arna Bontemps, ed., p. 269.

[11] W. E. B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1969), 45.

[12] Chidi Ikonnê From DuBois to Van Vechten, Westport, (Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981,) p. 73.

[13] Although Harlem was considered the black cultural center of the world, the literary florescence in the 20's reverberated throughout the country, as for example in Chicago, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. According

to Singh (The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance, p. 4), "the term 'Harlem' is firmly established"... as a descriptive label for the emergence of arts among black Americans all over America in the twenties."

14 First published in the Opportunity, 2 (Dec., 1924), pp. 371-374.

15 Langston Hughes, The Big Sea (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), p. 239.

16 According to her biographer, Robert Hemenway, Hurston was awarded a scholarship and began to attend Barnard in the fall of 1925, where she was the only black student (p. 21).

17 Alain Locke in his essay "The New Negro," in The New Negro, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1925), p. 7.

18 Locke, "The New Negro" in The New Negro, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1968), p. 7.

19 Bone, The Negro Novel in America, p. 57.

20 In Negro Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century, ed. Francis L. Broderick and August Meier (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1965), p. 59.

21 Locke, p. 47.

22 Locke, "Negro Youth Speaks," p. 51.

23 Locke, p. 47.

24 DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk, p. 138.

25 DuBois, "Criteria of Negro Art," Crisis, 32 (Octo., 1926), p. 296.

26 Locke, "Art or Propaganda," Harlem I (Nov.1928), p. 12.

27 Such as Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman Zora Hurston Gwendolyn B. Bennett.

28 Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Nation, 12, 23 June 1926, p. 692.

29 Hughes, 693.

30 Hughes, 693.

31 According to Locke's statement about the 'New Negro' creed in "The New Negro," p. 11.

32 According to Robert Bone's definition of Negro nationalism, pp. 5-6.

[33] DuBois, Darkwater, (New York: Schocken Books, 1920), p. 181.

[34] For such an image of the black woman, see Claude McKay's poems "Harlem Shadows" and "The Harlem Dancer" in Selected Poems of Claude McKay (New York: Bookman Associates, 1953). Also, Hughes' poems, "Fascination," in The Crisis, vol. 28, nº 2, p. 86; "Young Prostitute," "Three Poems of Harlem Cabaret," "Jazzonia," and "Young Singer" in The Crisis, vol. 26, nº 4, p. 162; "Danse Africaine" in The Crisis, vol. 24, nº 4, p. 167; "The South" in The Crisis, vo. 24, nº 2, p. 72; and "Joy" in The Crisis, vo. 31, nº 4, p. 173.

[35] James O. Young in Black Writers of the Thirties (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), explains that in the 20's, a growing number of anthropologists and psychologists, led by Franz Boas, began to overturn beliefs about innate cultural traits. According to him, "Boas demonstrated that cultural, and perhaps even some physical, differences were determined by environment, not by heredity" (p. 36).

[36] Robert Hemenway, "Zora Neale Hurston and the Eatonville Anthropology," in The Harlem Renaissance Remembered, ed. Arna Bontemps (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1972), p. 211.

[37] Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurton, p. 39.

[38] Beth Day, Sexual Life Between Blacks and Whites: The Roots of Racism (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1974). p. 343.

[39] Richard Wright, "How Bigger was Born," The Saturday Review of Literature, 22 (June 1940), p. 17.

[40] Warrington Hudlin, "The Renaissance Re-examined," in The Harlem Renaissance Remembered ed. Arna Bontemps, p. 271.

[41] Hurston, Dust Tracks on a Road, (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, Co., 1942), p. 214.

[42] Elise Johnson McDougald, "The Task of Negro Womanhood," in The New Negro, ed. Alain Locke, p. 381.

[43] According to Robert Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, p. 44.

[44] Locke, The New Negro, p. 48.

[45] According to Langston Hughes in The Big Sea, p. 235, this group of young writers also included Bruce Nugent, Gwendolyn Bennett, Aaron Douglas and John P. Davis. They reacted against the old generation of intellectuals, called 'the conservative faction,' by Robert Bone in The Negro Novel in America, p. 95. This group was led by W. E. B. DuBois, Benjamin Brawley, and William Braithwaite.

[46] Hughes, The Big Sea, p. 235.

[47] Warrington Hudlin, "The Renaissance Re-examined," in The Harlem Renaissance Remembered, ed. Arna Bontemps, p. 269.

[48] This is what Singh affirms in The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance, p. 21.

[49] James Weldon Johnson, "The Dilemma of the Negro Author," American Mercury, 15, nº 60 (Dec. 1928), p.478).

[50] As in Claude McKay's Home to Harlem, (New York: Pocket Book In., 1969) and Langston Hughes' Not Without Laughter, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, In., 1930), where the characters' black identity is conveyed by means of the primitive and exotic, or by his sense of belonging to the context of black folk life, respectively. In Wallace Thurman's The Blacker the Berry, (New York: The Macaulay Company, 1929), the mulatta's identity is ultimately affirmed by her acceptance of her dark skin.

[51] Hurston, "How it Feels to Be Colored Me," p.216.

[52] For example, the woman image in Arna Bontemps' God Sends Sunday, (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1931) and Claude McKay's famous poems "Harlem Shadows" and "The Harlem Dancer," Selected Poems of Claude McKay (New York: Bookman Associates, 1953).

[53] Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America, p. 98.

[54] There is Confusion (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1924). All quotes in the present essay are from this edition.

[55] W. E. B. DuBois and Alain Locke, "The Younger Literary Movement," The Crisis, vol. 27, nº 4 (Feb., 1924), p. 163.

[56] Singh, p. 75.

[57] Jessie Fauset, Plum Bun (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, Co., 1929). All quotes are from this edition.

[58] Addison Gayle Jr., The Way of the New World (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), p. 122.

[59] The Chinaberry Tree (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1931). All quotes are from this edition.

[60] Alain Locke, "We Turn to Prose," Opportunity, X nº 2 (Feb., 1932), p. 43.

[61] W. E. B. DuBois, Review of The Chinaberry Tree, The Crisis, (April 1932) p. 138.

[62] Quicksand (New York: A.A. Knoff, 1928).

63 Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America, p. 106.

64 Passing, (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1929).

65 According to Hiroko Soto in "Under the Harlem Shadow: A Study of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen," in The Harlem Renaissance Remembered, ed. Arna Bontemps, p. 88.

66 Cane (New York: Liveright, 1923). All quotes in the present essay are from this edition.

67 Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America, p. 81. Addison Gayle, Jr. in The Way of the New World (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976), p. 100, affirms that Cane "provided the model for a literary Renaissance."

68 DuBois and Locke, "The Younger Literary Movement," The Crisis, p. 161.

69 Cleanth Brooks in his article "Regionalism in American Literature," Journal of Southern History, 14 (Fall 1960), p. 54 explains the Negro's attachment to the south, his southernness: "I was once forcibly reminded of this when I told an audience of Negroes that in possessing the right of mobility they had the cherished American right to migrate to improve their status. To a man, it seemed to me, the audience took the position that the right to give up what they had and to abandon the fight where they lived was the right of refugees and therefore not much of a right at all."

70 Robert Bone, Down Home, p. 121.

71 Abraham Chapman, "The Harlem Renaissance in Literary History," College Language Association Journal, III, nº 1, (Sep. 1967), p. 51.

II - THE SHORT STORIES: LOOKING OUT OVER THE WORLD

Zora Neale Hurston knew intimately the content of the living oral - aural tradition of the black community of the rural South.[1] And she was aware of its cultural value for the black artist struggling to integrate the ethnic group experience into the stuff of literary production. The folk oral tradition was partly shaped by the carry-over of native African practices,[2] and partly determined by the socio-economic conditions created by slavery, under which system it throve. Donald A. Petesch explains:

> Barred from access to the written tradition; restricted to the heavy onerous labor - such as cotton picking, cane cutting, lumbering and saw-mill operating, railroad building, and levee labor - labor which employed gangs living and working in a communal fashion; kept poor in poor Southern states, so that there was little commercial entertainment; and located geographically where the climate permitted much visiting and gathering on front porches and store fronts - under these conditions folklore flourished.[3]

Hurston's fiction cannot be apprehended apart from this context. What grants it its genuine folk character is the particular attention Hurston paid to the oral - communal interchange. The skillful communication between the people is rendered through a pictorial conception of language that is based on the abundant use of metaphor and simile. This characteristic of the folk speech, which Hurston herself called "the will to adorn,"[4] permeates folksongs, proverbs and tales, as well as daily conversation. Also, traditional behavior is manifested in rituals which, to a greater or lesser extent, employ verbal expression. This is the case of parodies of

courting rituals, lying contests [contests in exaggerations], narratives that deal with folk heroes, such as Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox, and conjure practices.[5]

In Hurston's works, people speak through folklore. They are the traditon-bearers whose pride in their way of thinking and speaking conveys their pride in race. To the extent that they project an affirmative view of cultural uniqueness, they are saying that folk tradition is not the product of a colonialized people on the defensive, merely struggling to survive; they are exploring the creative potentialities of the folk's imagination and in so doing, they are bolstering a sense of group identity.

Since her first contribution to the Harlem Renaissance, the story "John Redding goes to Sea," published in the Stylus in 1921, Hurston displayed her commitment to the southern folk experience as suitable material for an aesthetic practice that would grant its traditional culture the status of a conscious art.[1] Unlike her fellow cosmopolitan writers who, for lack of a first-hand knowledge of the folk community, had only a vague and abstract idea of the uniqueness of the race's cultural experience, Hurston herself "embodied a closer association with racial roots than any other Renaissance writer."[6] In fact, she was the only writer who consistently used folk material and the southern milieu in her fiction.

The legacy of the folk culture constitutes the backbone of her short stories, all couched in the black dialect of central Florida and riddled with native beliefs and verbal practices that articulate the communal way of perceiving and making sense of its social experience. This communal way of perceiving is reflected, for exemple, in Hurston's exploration of conjure lore, that Robert Hemenway describes as "an alternative mode for perceiving reality, contrasting sharply with what is perceived as the white man's excessive rationality."[7]

Hurston's deliberate borrowing from the folk tradition in conceiving the texture of her stories, points to the commitment of her fiction to the real, to those

elements that conferred on the folk the characteristics of a separate community whose traditions resist the impact of the white 'high' culture. In this sense, Hurston self-conciously alligned her fictional practice to a political posture. The portrayal of the black rural community, its racial identity, poses an antagonistic attitude towards white cultural hegemony in as much as its linguistic and behavioral manifestations assert its right to exist and function apart from the standards and norms of the white majority.

Considering that it is precisely in language and behavior that ideology is construed and encoded, it is necessary, at this point, to regard Hurston's works as an integral part of the ideological apparatus of culture, that is, black culture. According to Terry Eagleton's definition in Criticism and Ideology:

> Literature is an agent as well as effect of such struggles ... by which a subordinated state, class or region preserves and perpetuates at the ideological level an historical identity shattered or eroded at the political.[8]

To approach the texts from this point of view is to acknowledge them as an effective ideological medium for the advancement of a consensus regarding folk culture which, opposing the black urban experience as detrimental to the group's cultural identity, becomes essential for the blacks to reappropriate their racial roots.

To the same extent that the milieu answers to the conditions of the individual, class or race, the notion of roots cannot be divorced from a sense of place, the physical space within which it is fed to become the umbilical cord of the group's identity. Hence the symbiotic relationship between folk culture and the South as a distinctive landscape, evoked in all of Hurston's stories. The South is literally home, the locus of the values that secure the group's solidarity and cohesion. Rather than spelling shame and ignominy, it is seen as the nourishing soil for a people whose mode of thought and behavior as well as its creative imagination, have

always derived its impetus from its closeness to the land. Approached as a whole, Hurston's stories unveil an urge to blackness, the imprint of black cultural nationalism that, buttressed by an assumption of racial distinctiveness within a specific social and geographical context, constitutes, in fact, the basic thrust of her narratives.

However, a close examination of the stories reveals that the texts pose a problematic relationship with this ideology from which they emerge. The relationship is problematic to the extent that they distance from the given during the process of a fictional practice that alters their boundaries of meaning. In other words, the deep-seated ideological imperative to celebrate the folk, particularly encoded in their language, is itself worked upon by an overdetermination of authorial-biographical factors that unveils a degree of recalcitrance to the oppressive and conservative context of folk community life. As Hurston portays it, the community is the living embodiment of a folk culture that, being patriarchal, includes a traditional predisposition, legitimized by custom, to assign a low status to woman. Yet, the way she handles the social relationships between black male and black female suggests that the latter's status cannot simply be understood in terms of a universal cultural given but is the result, too, of a sexual ideology that points to the black community's insertion into the larger context of a white patriarchal class-society. Such an ideology ratifies the attainment of masculine identity in terms of virile self-assertion and power, and socializes woman into passivity: her identity is defined in terms of separateness, immobility and lack of value. From this point of view, the particular feature of Hurston's fiction emerges: while racial oppression is addressed to and contested at the cultural level, it is virtually overshadowed at the narrative level -- the stories consistently advance, though from a variety of angles, the question of woman's subjection to "otherness" within the racial group. In this sense, oppression is

not a condition exclusively imposed from the outside, but a condition perpetuated by the mechanism of social life which operates to suppress the development of creative, self-actualizing human beings. As part of this mechanism, marriage plays a most important role. By dichotomizing the sexual roles and by, thus, locking the articulation of male/female relationships into a class-system of the dominant and the deferent, marriage underscores woman's inferior social status and upholds the ideology of manhood. Hurston's stories problematize the superstructure of communal life by establishing levels of tension between the social and the individual, between subject and object, between masculine and feminine. In short, Hurston brings a feminist perspective to her exploration and treatment of the black woman within the societal system, that ultimately questions the values by which that system operates.

"John Redding Goes to Sea"[9] is a story based on the conflict between an imaginative young man who longs to leave his native village in search of new experiences, and his mother who possessively opposes his wishes. As a first insight into the functioning of the community and the individual's presence within the communal system of social relations, the text discloses significant perceptions which are not only rendered in what is overtly stated but also in what is covertly expressed.

At the outset, the element that sets in movement the pattern of the story is the substantial difference between John Redding and the villagers. Naturally curious about the world that lies beyond the village limits and inclined to day-dreaming, John Redding has always felt a compulsive desire to ride "away to the horizon", which has set him apart from the community. In his mother's opinion, and so in the villager's also, John's queer behavior is the result of a spell placed on him at birth by a local witch. Such a desire to leave the security of home for the uncertainties of a life 'out there' cannot be conceived as natural in the folk understanding of the ties that bind the individual to his kin.

Leading a life turned inward, John Redding develops a close intimacy with the natural world, as it comes to embody his aspirations and fears. Thus his attachment to the river whose movement outward reaffirms the content of his desire, as well as his childhood fear of the pine tree that looks like a skull with a crown on. Both images become the controlling symbols of the narrative as they represent the two poles that define John's adult life: his longing for freedom and the threat of fixity and stagnation.

John Redding's awakening to personhood is significantly marked in the text by a speech where he relinquishes the use of dialect to verbalize his abhorence for feeling "like a lump of dirt turned over by the plow - no thought or movement or nothing" (p.17). Education has widened the gap between him and his peers - "he went to high school at the country seat where none of the villagers went" (p.17) - and has, naturally, fostered ambitions that he is not willing to smother.

While his father, Alfred Redding, takes sides with him, his mother Matty fiercely resists John's idea. Their contention illuminates their marriage and their roles. Alfred is a frustrated and hopeless man reduced to ineffectuality by a wife who is used to emotional blackmail to get what she wants. His onetime desire to travel had to be reppressed with his marriage. Bitter, he blames women for being a hindrance to man's projects: "'Jes' let uh fellah mak uh motion lak gettin' somewhere an' some 'oman'll begin tuh hollah 'Stop theah! Where's you goin'? Don't fuhgit you b'longs tuh me'" (p.18). conforming to a stifling life of inaction, Alfred still holds on to an abstract and idealized notion of manhood; "'It jes' comes natcheral fuh er man tuh travel'" (p.17), which he readily instills in his son.

Matty plays the traditional feminine role as wife and mother whose life remains defined essentially and solely in emotional terms. She is an anxious, unhappy and debilitated woman whose large eyes are "watery and weak" (p.16). Because the meaning of her life is vicar-

iously centered upon bearing and raising her son, she is stubbornly determined to prevent a disruption in her stable world by opposing John's wish and, often, indulging in crises of self-pity to soften his will. She acknowledges her ignorance, a result of her constricted life and the narrow range of her experiences; her ignorance can partly account for her incapacity to understand how vital it is for her son to escape the lethargic quality of village life. Matty illustrates the provincial and narrow-minded mentality of the folk community that enforces conformity to the detriment of the individual's need for expansion and growth. In this sense, she is the true embodiment of the folk ethos. Her role ensures the perpetuation of the parameters by which village life is regulated. She is a conservative force that resists change and upholds the status quo in her loyalty to folk social mores and in her commitment to familial values represented by home and family.

John's unexpected marriage in the spring brings a hiatus of peace in the household, soon dispelled, however, by the recrudescence of John's longing. The gate, the white dusty road and the river become metaphors for a wish unfulfilled, an absent reality. As elements that suggest access to experience, their presence points to John's privation, a privation that is appropriately felt in terms of the fulfillment of one's manhood. Given the context of John's struggle to break free from his mother's influence, to avoid self-limitation, and his close relationship with the father who encourages his pursuit, it comes natural for John to conceive of manhood as a condition dependent on his ability to strive and think: "'Let me learn to strive and think - in short, be a man'" (p.18). His statement voices the current sexual ideology that denies to women the development of these abilities.

The war waged against him by his mother and his newly wed wife Stella, who also resorts to emotional tactics to dissuade John Redding, is abruptly interrupted when he is asked to labor on the St. John River bridge threatened by collapse from an approaching hurricane.

Intimations of his oncoming death, as the story moves to its climax, are promptly recognized in the household when a screech-owl alights on the roof and "shivers forth his doleful cry" (p.20). While the narrator keeps her detachment by remarking that "Possibly he had been blown out of his nest by the wind" (p.20), the characters respond to their folk origins by burning salt and turning clothes inside out to counter the effects of such a bad omen. Even Mr Redding who had scolded his wife for her beliefs in conjure - "'a low life mess,'" in his point of view, -joins the women in their practices. It is symptomatic that he cannot escape his milieu.

John's death during the storm that destroys the bridge is posed as a resolution to the story's conflict rather than its suppression. Through the stratagem of a literary device, not devoid of a romantic touch, John gains mobility otherwise out of his reach. Ironically, death becomes an act of defiance against the boundaries that close in on the individual. Understandably, Mr Redding does not allow his son's body to be rescued: so that it can follow its path to the sea.

The final imagery suggests oppenness, freedom. John's body floats on a piece of timber with his arms outstreched. And the narrator's description evokes calmness, a self-contained satisfaction that dissipates the former atmosphere of tragedy:

> Out on the bosom of the river, bobbing up and down as if waiving good bye, piloting his little craft on the shining river, John Redding floated away toward Jacksonville, the sea, the wide world - at last (p.21).

Once the reader acknowledges that the overall design of the story moves towards this sense of freedom, it is impossible not to observe that such an outcome actually asserts the cultural assumptions that underlie sexual assymmetry: man is mobile and woman is stationary. Such an assumption is also contained in Mr Redding's notion of manhood. For him, it is in man's nature to seek new

experiences out in the world. Man is a wanderer in search of self-definition, he makes himself through his actions. As for the woman, her identity is a given, and her fixity conforms to what is socially expected of her, since she is fit only for marriage, home and children and not "'tuh be floppin' roun' from place tuh place lak some uh dese reps follerin' uh section gang'" (p.18).

The fact that Hurston portrays characters who fall into sexual stereotypes does not mean that she either allies herself with them or reinforces their attitudes. On the contrary, her treatment of the women shows that Hurston regarded them as products of the conservative and provincial mentality of village life. Bound to their place and reduced to playing a nurturing, supportive role, they cannot accept the possibility of change as a positive process of individual growth. The reader can even sense the narrator's impatience with their emotional fits, their exploitative love and their accomodation to a life that seems more an entrappment than an exercise of personhood and humanity. Hurston leaves very clear that marriage is a central aspect of the socio-familial structure that curtails the vitality of creative beings by narrowing their possibilities for experience.

This story crystallizes the tension between the individual and the superstructure of communal life that permeates Hurston's works. Besides the elements of the story itself, discussed above, there are three more reasons that substantiate this tension. First, the folk is not threatened with derision or contempt, but on two occasions, the narrator refers to the simple life of the folk, implying a qualitative distance between the narrative voice and the characters. Second, the text validates collective racial experience by depicting the villagers as the bearers of communal values but it covertly questions the status alloted to women, the first victims of the social mechanism, and the general atmosphere of stagnation that stifles people's lives. Third, death posed as the resolution of the conflict does not solve

the ideological conflict of authority versus freedom for, actually, there is no freedom in John's death. It is the consequence of an accident and not a result of his conscious choice. Thus, rather than a solution, the romantic note veils a dilemma. No matter how the narrator imparts a sympathetic note to John's cause and endorses his thrust to freedom, such a constraint insinuates the presence of a collective censor acting upon and through the authorial expression. The fact that John's death is linked to the encroachment of progress [the construction of a bridge] that is bound to alter the quality of the village life, bringing its insulatiry to an end and therefore posing a threat to its value system, is an indicator of the tension that underlies Hurston's portrayal of the folk community: on the one hand, the village is the locus of a way of life that keeps the community together by preserving the shared sense of racial identity. But on the other, it is a life that deprives the individual of the possibility of self-autonomy, of pursuing personal aspirations. The "horizon," the encompassing metaphor of the world of possibilities that lies outside the village's scope, may afford to the individual the sort of experiences through which he/she can earn an identity outside the definitions externally imposed by the communal and the familial, but its pursuit means his/her alienation from the whole, from the collective. At the end, the tension is dispelled by a narrator who implies that it is better to be a dead escapee than to stay and experience death-in-life.

In "Drenched in Light,"[10] the narrative is anchored in the conflict between Grandma Potts, the strict authority figure responsible for the upbringing of her motherless grandchildren, and her grandaughter Isie Watts whose lively and imaginative personality defies the patterns of behavior traditionally prescribed for "'Uh great big 'leben yeah ole gal'" (p.371), as her grandmother sees her.

In part I, the contour of the conflict is particularized by the dynamics of sex-role socialization,[11] in

which the grandmother is the primary agent in conditioning a rebellious adolescent female. For the sensitive Isie, it is not easy to give up her favorite spot on the gate post from which she "Looked yearningly up the gleaming shell road" (p.371), to meet the demands of the grandmother who, invariably, resorts to threats of physical violence to see her wishes fulfilled. Unquestionably, Isie has devised her own strategies to cope with the repressive quality of her life: she lies deliberately, is petulant and resists the limitations that dull the expression of her expansive personality; in a word, she subverts the female code she is supposed to abide. This code is a series of'do nots! She should not race and romp, she should not sit with the knees separated, should not whistle, play with boys or cross her legs. Not only does this code perpetuate male-female role dichotomies but it also encodes a cultural devaluation of woman as far as it educates her into passivity and non-competitiveness in social life.

Isie's most glaring defiance of the code finds expression in her attraction to the road, her attachment to the gate post and her imaginary journeys to the horizon, "the edge of the world." As danger zone areas that lie outside the boundaries of grandma's territory, the road, the gate and the horizon come to represent, for Isie, the possibility for self-expression and new experiences. It is by being in her favorite spot hailing passing travelers, undermining grandma's scolding, that "Everybody in the country, white and colored, knew Isie Watts, the joyful" (p.371).

Isie's limitless capacity to surmount the harsh atmosphere that surrounds her by just being herself, a girl full of vivacity endeared to all who know her, is best illustrated in the episode of the picnic. Escaping the threat of physical punishment for having dared to shave her grandmother's chin while the latter was sleeping, Isie followed a carnival to a charity picnic where, dressed as a gipsy in her grandmother's Holland tablecloth, she becomes the center of attention because of her superb

dancing skills. Caught in the act by a frantic grandmother, she flees into the woods.

Structurally, this scene is important because it dramatizes the impact of familial censorship upon Isie's most deeply felt experience of freedom, her self-expression through dancing. Besides, the scene is a transition for part II, where Isie, outside the physical space of her home, faces the challenge of a new experience: her encounter with white people.

The chance meeting of Isie with three white persons in the woods provides the reader with a new psychological insight into the former's character. For example, the episode confirms what had been only suggested before. Isie's attitude towards the whites clearly suggests that her responses are based on a natural spontaneity and willingness to help. Obviously, her perceptions have not been tainted by prejudices of any kind and, as a character, she remains consistent with the portrait in part I. If she indulges in her fantasies while riding in the car along with the company, it is because, being an imaginative girl, she experiences her dreams as actuality. She is so engrossed with her novel experience that she believes herself to be a princess, enjoying a trip to the horizon in "one of those heavenly chariots" (p.373). In the context of Isie's life, her dreams represent nothing but an opportunity of escaping from the narrow possibilities of living in grandma's world. And it is only natural that for a poor black country girl, the glamour and fascination with a world out of her reach is somehow linked with things white. But to go so far as to regard her fantasies as an unconscious desire to be white, it is to infer from the text what can neither be substantiated nor validated. Yet, Robert Bone in Down Home, remarks that this story leaves no doubt as to the fact that Hurston's most effective fantasy was that of being white.[12]

What the text renders as unequivocal, is that the presence of the white element neutralizes the familial authority embodied in Grandma Potts. On handing five

dollars to Mrs Potts to make up for the loss of her fancy tablecloth from "O'landah," the white lady expresses her wish to take Isie to her hotel in Maitland to see her dance again. Grandma's readiness in agreeing with the arrangement in spite of the switches in hand, is not free from a note of subservience, Hurston's awareness of the burden of oppression molding the form of exchange in relations between the races: "'Oh, yessum, yessum,'" Grandma cut in, "'Everything's alright, sho' she kin go, yessum'" (p.373).

The descriptive yields to the psychological as the narrator probes the effects of this encounter upon the characters. While Isie "for the first time in her life, felt herself appreciated" (p.373), grandma "had been somewhat squelched..." (p.374). As Isie rides out in the car snuggling up to her benefactress, the final remarks are made by the white woman, who seems spellbound by the girl's charms: "'I want a little of her sunshine to soak my soul. I need it'"(p.374).

Though what underlies the woman's wish is a note of patronage that preys on the stereotype of the black as the unspoiled child of nature whose vitality acts therapeutically on the debilitated white, her remark addresses Isie's eagerness to make contact with the outside world, and in this sense, it contrasts radically with the story's opening statement where the imposing tone of Grandma's voice defines the range of Isie's limited world: "'YOU Isie Watts! Git 'own offen dat gate post an' rake up dis yahd'" (p.371)!

It is interesting to observe that the beginning and the ending of the story stand at the opposite poles of Isie's experience, an experience that, characterized by the conflict between authority and freedom, moves towards a concrete opportunity for self-expression. The geographical movement, Isie's ride to Maitland, corresponds thus to a movement towards freedom, toward new experiences that can only add to the girl's developing sense of personhood. As opposed to the final movement in "John Redding goes to Sea," Isie's movement is both horizontal and vertical. Her mobility not only upsets the tradi-

tional order of her cicumscribed world, but also represents an act that overthrows caste barriers. Isie does not 'kwow her place' precisely because she has refused to internalize the limitations imposed by her age, sex and race. Her indifference to sexual conventions and racial prejudice is responsible for the warmth and spontaneity of a personality that is transfigured in the metaphorical expression "drenched in light." As a character, Isie Watts projects an uncorrupted inner resourcefulness, and in this sense she is a prototype of the black woman whose resources, according to Joyce Ladner, "accounted for their highly creative ability not only to devise the most ingenious ways to adapt to oppression, but also to develop immense creativity within this process."[13]

Historically, seen against the background of the Harlem Renaissance, "John Redding Goes to Sea" and "Drenched in Light" bear a relationship with the moment of the blacks' reclamation of experience during the 20's, and, in this sense, both are transfused with the Renaissance spirit. Leaving the static society of the conservative South, blacks sought a new way of life in the northern metropolis which could validate their eager assertion of an emancipated black identity and a right to self-expression. However, rather than merely reflecting history, both stories problematize history in their ideological configuration. The impetus for freedom at the core of the texts' symbolic journeys unchains a rupture of the individual from the folk community, which generates a dissonance between the texts' pre-textual ideology, that is, the urge to blackness contained in its linguistic mode and the ideology encoded in the dominant metaphor of 'the horizon! In the second story, this dissonance is expanded as it integrates an element that problematizes the historical moment. It is a black female who defies authority and the fixity of her narrowed world to attain freedom of movement and opportunity to develop herself into an independent and creative woman. So, if in "John Redding" the

protagonist's movement is linked to a sense of manhood, ironically mocked by death, in "Drenched in Light" it is related to a sense of womanhood, not made explicit in the text, but certainly lingering in its margins as an incidence of biographical factors playing on the text's historical significance.

The pattern of this story obviously evokes Hurston's defiance of the feminine role assigned to her in her native Eatonville, her distantiation from the folk to undertake a journey that plunged her right into the Harlem Renaissance. Furthermore, a close investigation of the text affords a more conclusive affirmation of how the biographical is indeed articulated with the literary, establishing a point of view that evolves out of Hurston's position as a black woman in a white, male-dominated society.

The starting point of such an investigation is the narrator whose identity is inseparable from the author's, given the similarity between the imagery of "John Redding" and the present story. Once this fact is acknowledged, two important elements emerge in the text: the narrator's consciousness of gender and color. The issue of color is perceptibly inscribed in the narrative when the white individuals enter the scene. Yet, there is a significant difference between the narrator's descriptions of white men and the white woman. While the former individuals are primarily described by their sexual identity as "man at the wheel," "the indifferent men," "the rather aloof man" (p.373) and "the man with a short harsh laugh" (p. 374), the latter is particularized by "the white hand," her sweet smile and protective gestures. What these descriptions suggest is on the one hand, a certain interest, on the part of the narrator, in establishing a distance between herself and the members of the opposite sex, and on the other, an almost deliberate attempt to minimize differences of color and race in view of a sympathetic bond that seems to link the narrator - protagonist - white woman: their common womanhood. The story, ultimately, forwards a point of view couched in the lan-

guage of it personal experience: Hurston's refusal to accept limitations imposed by sex and race that would hinder her pursuit of self-expression and her undisguised sense of sisterhood that cuts across racial lines and makes of interracial contact a worthwhile experience to be shared.

Hurston's next story "Spunk,"[14] marks the beginning of a new phase in her fiction where she concentrates on different forms of male/female relationships and where she explores the black woman's role, and the limitations and possibilities for self-fulfillment within the social structure of the community life. "Spunk" offers a bleak and gloomy picture of a rural community where virile aggressiveness is the form of expected behavior. It reinforces the prototype of physical strength, daring and violent affirmation of masculinity held as the ideal model of manhood by the community members at large. In this patriarchal milieu, the ideological expression of sexual asymmetry is clearly defined by a consensus about woman as an object of ownership, whether it be in the context of a legal marriage or of an extra-marital affair.

The plot relies on a version of the love triangle. What saves the story from veering towards sentimentality, is the dramatic tension that gradually builds up with the insertion of supernatural elements that seem to have a decisive weight on the characters' destinies. The narrator's detachment and her final critical assessment of collective behavior, visible signs of her non-alignment with the world she portrays, endow the narrative with an extraordinary lucidity of perception and insight that places the story, in spite of its compactness, among the best written by Hurston.

As the title implies "Spunk" is a man's territory, where his capacity to go after anything he desires, especially a woman, is a measure of his worth. In this respect, Spunk Banks, the fearless saw-mill worker, is the legitimate hero of the community as he defiantly parades with his neighbor's wife, inviting the gleeful

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expressions of admiration, if not of jealousy, from the store-front townsmen. Joe Kanty, the cuckolded husband, is despised for his cowardly attitude, which makes him the laughing stock of his peers. Wrestling with his own inadequacy, Joe's sense of outrage finds the only outlet available: "his Adam's apple twitching nervously up and down his throat" (p.106), or his lips working "like he wants to say somethin' and can't" (p.107). Taunted by the village men, Joe Kanty gathers courage to confront Spunk. He grabs a hollow ground razor and goes after the lovers in the thicket, an action that receives the endorsement of the group: "'Talking like a man, Joe. Course that's you' fambly affairs, but Ah like to see grit in anybody'" (p.106). The encounter of the "giant of a brown-skinned man" (105) with the man who fiddles with his suspender buckle and wears overalls much too large is the confrontation of unequal forces. Joe sneaks from behind in order to catch Spunk unawares but is shot to death before accomplishing his plan. Spunk, cleared of criminal charges, prepares to marry Lena when a new element changes the course of the events. The appearance of a bob-cat, the most powerful magic element in conjure belief and commonly taken as an apparition,[15] throws Spunk off his nerve, for he is convinced that the cat is Joe who "done sneaked back from Hell" (p.109). Since the supernatural acting in the material world is an accepted fact in the community's world view, its presence entails a reassessment of past events. Thus, Joe is proclaimed the bravest man for having confronted Spunk at a disadvantage and for coming back in the form of a ghost to haunt the man who, supposedly, is afraid of nothing. From this moment on, Spunk's predicament is sealed off, and the story's outcome confirms the villagers beliefs. An unnatural force pushes him into the circle saw, and Spunk dies cursing Joe who, both he and the group believes, pushed him to his death. The final description of the wake is an ironic comment on the villagers' behavior as it justaposes the heavy atmosphere of tragic doom with the scene of men and women consuming

food, an activity which, on the instinctual level, is allied to the other activity that engrosses the group's interest, the sexual: "The women ate heartily of the funeral baked meats and wondered who would be Lena's next. The men whispered coarse conjectures between guzzles of whiskey" (p.111).

The story elicits a mordacious and trenchant reponse to the corrosive way of life that the villagers are all too ready to legitimize. Its social mores, dictated by a patriarchy (whose representative members are the storefront townsmen, Walter Thomas, Ike Clarke and Elijah Mosley), in whose code, deceit, slickness and ruthlessness are justified means of proving one's virility - encourages the definition of man as the active and aggressive subject in the social sphere. The perpetuation of such a concept of manhood relegates woman to the sphere of private life where she is no more than an object of personal property and a token of man's pride. Both men's actions are geared to assert their manhood: Joe's determination to recover Lena in spite of her will is designed to redeem his soiled manhood's pride, while Spunk's reiterated claims of ownership are meant to secure him the prize that his daring and strength have rightly earned him. In a society that idealizes manhood in terms of physical prowess, a quality that is associated in people's mind with sexual prowess as well, it is not surprising that Lena is taken up with Banks. Her preference articulates a culturally conditioned response to the values and practices of her environment. This is the reason why her deviant behavior is quietly absorbed into the normal function of village life, without notable disruption of its social mechanism.

As a character, Lena's portrait is very vaguely drawn. However, to regard her as peripheral to the story without pursuing any further the significance of her presence in its context is to overlook the subtleties of Hurston's text, the way by which the narrative discloses an ideological meaning that forwards the question of black womanhood. By concentrating on the clash between male

forces, the narrative establishes a silence around the female character. Lena's personality, her motivations and feelings are not disclosed except through her reactions and responses to husband and lover. She is just a passive figure, destitute of a life of her own. Yet, in the process of analysis, this silence, meant to keep her in the background, becomes a most eloquent statement on the status of the black woman.

On the surface, the narrative reproduces the way Lena is perceived in the social context: as an object. In a context that espouses male values as the ultimate ideal, woman is a bitch or a potential bitch as far as this context provides no space for her development of personhood, leaving for her the only area where she can act out: her sexuality. Ironically, the only role fitted for her engenders the canker that works beneath the apparent smoothiness of social life. And she ends up by bringing about violence, destruction and death as the pivotal element, beginning and end of men's destinies. She is the one who survives in the end, beyond moral reproach or guilt, as a symbolic dissociative force doomed to subvert again the order of the male world.

On the deeper level, this silence or narrative gap[16] that surrounds the female character speaks of what is not said in the logical development of the discourse; that is, of the suppression of black womanhood in a male-dominated context. In this perspective, silence becomes a covert ideological strategy that generates an oppositional reaction to the manifest meaning of the story, the villagers' consensus regarding manhood. The fact that "Spunk" presents a latent meaning repressed behind the transparent one, points to the story's containment, its censored dimension that, actually, rests on what is said in the narrator's "omission." This dimension can only be accounted for by investigating the relations between text, history and personal reality.

Published in 1925 in Locke's anthology, "Spunk" was praised for its proletarian subject matter and its folkloric texture, key elements in the conception of a

racial art postulated by the Harlem artists. At a time when the New Negro Movement reached its mature self-expression as a collective voice of cultural weight in the American society, "Spunk" came to address the aesthetic aspirations of the group. In addition to this fact, "Spunk" also connected to an important aspect of the movement. It struck the chord of an embbeded need that acted as the psychological lever to propel the black consciousness of the 20's: the ego-enhancing sense of black manhood which was essential in promoting the racial ideals of political leverage and competition with white men. Thus, a reading of "Spunk" at that particular historical moment, could not fail to reveal that it was indeed steeped in the ideology of the Black Renaissance.

However, the discussion above evinced the fact that there is actually a distance between the reality portrayed and what the text says, that what lies in its narrative underground conveys a wordless indictment, a questioning of the values that lie visible on its surface. This dialectical movement of the text takes us to a consideration of the role of the writer vis-à-vis the historical and personally felt reality. As a black writer, Hurston was responsive to the postulates of the movement. As a woman, she was aware of the practices, within the black community, that suppressed the black woman's personhood and perpetuated her exploitation either as sexual object or domestic labourer. Yet, in the context of the movement where the role of black womanhood was proclaimed as being supportive of black manhood for the sake of racial unity, Hurston felt the natural constraints imposed by racial pressures, which prevented her from treating the question of sexual oppression in an overt fashion. It is in this respect that the narrative strategy in "Spunk" assumes its true significance. It allowed Hurston to pursue an honest self-expression without directly antagonizing the broad concerns of the New Negro movement. On considering this particular aspect, it must be borne in mind her position as a woman, a minority within

a minority, and her dependency on favorable approval of her works on the part of leading black intellectuals, in order to remain solvent as a literay producer. As the present investigation shows, "Spunk" is far from being "deceptively simple"[17] as Darwin Turner puts it in In a Minor Chord, and it illustrates how a literary artifact can become an active response to a real historical situation.

In comparison to "Spunk", "Muttsy"[18] is a simple, straightforward story. Though the world portrayed is of a strikingly different kind, as the setting shifts from the Eatonville scene to New York, Harlem, the narrative bears inscribed in its texture the ideological path that Hurston chose to follow: relations of power and dominance in male/female relationschips.

The story tells the plight of a young inexperienced southern girl who arrives in New York and is given shelter in a Harlem speakeasy. There, she is not only exposed to the malevolent influence of Ma Turner, the owner and a former prostitute who cannot hide her satisfaction at the prospect of easy money that the girl represents, but also to the underworld of alcohol, gambling and sexual swinging that threatens to claim her as one of its own. Amidst those who seek fun in the place is Muttsy, the towering gambler with a diamond set in his tooth to whom the men defer and from whom the women seek notice. Too naive to perceive hidden intentions, Pinkie Jones believes in Muttsy's promise of a job in town, while her growing sense of disgust with the smoky liquor-filled place makes her yearn "to escape from her strange surroundings" (p.249).

The narrative unfolds in terms of the contrast freedom/imprisonment, captor/prey. From the moment Pinkie Jones enters the speakeasy, she experiences a sense of corruption, of reality vitiated and turned into a bad dream. Ma Turner's smile "resembled the smile of the Wolf in Red Riding Hood" (p.246). The phony, unfriendly people with a mode of speech she does not understand, chase her as if she were a prey at bay. Appropriately ,

the Harlem scene is the backdrop for her ordeal: "It was very ugly by day, and night kindly had some of its sordid homeliness. Yes, nightime gave it life" (p.249). An artificial life, far from what Pinkie had experienced back in Florida: "Everyone in there was shaking shimmies to music, rolling eyes heavenward as they picked imaginary grapes out of the air, or drinking" (p.247). The intoxication of the senses parallels the corruption of male/female relations. Sexuality is the driving force in this sexist world where women are picked up and dropped according to men's will and where power is displayed by how much a man can settle on his woman, thus making possible the existence of 'Forty-dollars-Kates.'

Pinkie's initiation into the Harlem underworld is a frightful experience which deprives her of autonomy and selfhood. Coaxed to join in the party on the evening of her arrival, she has to stand the debasing flattery of predatory men who grossly cannot perceive her in other terms than that of food, notably meat. She is either "like a radish," or "lil' chiken," "lil' Pigmeat" and "lil' pullet." In this environment, Muttsy is the hero. Not only is he skillful with the men under his orders as a boss stevedore or with the dice in gambling but also his reputation among women helps to envelop his personality with that sort of irresistible charisma, which he now believes he exertsupon Pinkie. Aware of the danger, she feels helpless and defenceless. For a while she entertains thoughts of going home but quickly realizes that "there was no home to which she could return" (p.247). A felling of being 'walled in' is intensified after considering her economical limitations. Yearning for a job that would ultimately win her freedom, she places her hopes on Muttsy. However, on finding out that he had intruded in her bedroom while she was asleep and had left his diamond ring, she decides to flee: "She did not know where she was going, and cared little so long as she removed herself as far as possible from the house where the great evil threatened her" (p.250).

This is the last image of Pinkie Jones on her own. What follows in the sequence of events is actually an account of the obliteration of her will to become the victim, the 'prey' of man's covetous desire by which he asserts his power, and consequently, his manhood. The exchange between Ma Turner and Muttsy after discovering Pinkie's escape illuminates the nature of his anxiety: "'... But ah never miss no girl ah wants, you knows me.' "Everybody in this man's town knows you gets whut you wants' " (p.250). In this context, the question of love becomes perfunctory: "'Ah know she would. 'Cause ah'd make her'" (p.250). Pinkie's abortive attempt at freedom is nowhere rendered with more finality than when the narrator briskly describes the moment when Muttsy finds her wandering on the streets: "He turned and followed her; took the employment office slip from her hand and destroyed it; took her arm and held it' (p.267). Pinkie's resistance is broken, and she becomes invisible in the text, as if her marriage were a synonym for her death as an individual.

The closing scene which takes place a month later, downplays Pinkie's fate to focus on Muttsy's successful return to gambling. Accomplishing his design, Muttsy does not see any reason to keep his resolution to quit, and, besides, his pride does not admit the possibility of being replaced as the "king uh de bones in Harlem" (p.267). The scene dramatizes his surrender to the inescapable pattern of artificial and corrupted life in the urban center where the temptation of power and material status sets the black man against his peers and, also, against the black woman. The activities through which he asserts himself, the dice game and the sexual game, rely on manipulative strategies which have no other purpose than to deceive. So, they represent forms of oppression by means of which he subjects the other or others to his domination.

However, Muttsy is not only the oppressor but also the victim in the context of the story. He represents the outburst of the black man's desire for economic and

social mobility, a desire arrested by a long history of racism and which only the great migration to the urban centers of the 20's, allowed to surface. Though such an outburst is a response to a psychological need, Hurston does not seem willing to legitimize it, for Muttsy's actions subvert moral and ethical values [his link to the underworld of city corruption, gambling and prostitution] and are, thus, detrimental to personal and racial growth. From this point of view, the final scene means exactly the opposite of what it seems to mean. By bringing the reader into a relationship of criticism of Muttsy's actions, the authorial presence imparts an ironic content to the story's outcome. Rather than pointing to his success, the final scene shows his defeat, his victimization by the city's degraded values in an environment that, as a product of the politics of racism, does not offer the conditions, economical and social, for the development of his potentialities. Muttsy's marginality is thus representative of the black people's living conditions, notably the black men's, in the northern urban centers. As early as 1903, W. E. B. Dubois in <u>The Souls of Black Folks</u> affirmed that "in the North the tendency is to emphasize the radicalism of the Negro. Driven from his birthright in the South [...] he finds himself in a land where he can scarcely earn a decent living amid the harsh competition and color discrimination."[19] Muttsy's fate evokes the historical situation of the black men whose new found freedom ended in the gambling hells, the brothels and the slums of northern cities.

"Muttsy" is a story where Hurston's allegiance to the south is expressed in her sharp criticism of the blacks' life-style in New York. Her depiction of Harlem as not just an exotic place of racial laughter and nostalgic tom-toms but as a place for a highly artificial and self-destructive life indicates her misgivings about the social and cultural viability of turning Harlem into the effective center for the black community. The community she portrays in "Muttsy" is warped by the degree

of power and subordination present in human relationships between male/male and male/female. Hurston's criticism which comes, at times, close to satire, shows that she did not subscribe to the idea deceptively proclaimed in the 20's: "The great migration to the North seems to be one of the practical economic forces working toward a solution of the race problem."[20]

By contrasting southern innocence with northern rapaciousness, Hurston marked the text of her story with a consciousness of the South as a distinct region where its simple rural life is associated with a purity of mind and intentions at odds with the complex and sophisticated life in the northern urban center. However, this allegiance is not merely a passive and unquestioning idealization of the rural South. It must be pointed out that, on the one hand, the main character flees home to escape from both familial oppression and economic hardships. For her, the north means freedom, and freedom entails the opportunity for a job and the possibility of furthering her education. On the other hand, although she denies the existence of a home to go back to, it is a denial full of regret and nostalgia, a feeling of loss. This fictional situation seems to embody Hurston's complex relationship with the south, her loyalty but also her awareness of the limitations it poses for a black individual, particularly a black woman, seeking freedom and human dignity. The overall effect of the story, however, is that the limitations of southern life are not as threatening as the encroachment of the northern 'evil' whose status and power taint the very basis of an authentic relationship between Pinkie and Muttsy: equality and respect for the individual's will.

"Sweat"[21] stands out among Hurston's pieces of short fiction. It is a remarkably well written story displaying Hurston's strength as a storyteller. In "Sweat" she contrived a powerful and dramatic narrative in which the insight into the dynamics of domestic tyranny is combined with an artful weaving of images whose symbolic content

resonates with the history of black oppression and its expression in marital relationships.

Set in Florida, the story depicts the life of a married couple, Delia Jones and Sykes, at its critical point. For fifteen years, Delia slaved like an elephant to keep both from starving by washing white people's clothes. Exploitation and abuse constitutes the basic feature of her relations with Sykes. But having internalized her subservient role, she lacks initiative and willpower to change her life. Sykes, an irresponsible and lusty man who brought into their marriage nothing more than a fleeting passion, seeks sexual gratification with various women. Finally, enamoured of a woman out of town, he not only wishes to marry her but also wants to evict Delia from the house she bought with her own sweat. In order to achieve his end, Sykes torments Delia by preying on her fear of snakes. When fear is not enough to drive her away, he plots to kill her by placing a rattle snake in the clothes hamper. Ironically, Delia escapes while Sykes himself is bitten and dies unassisted by the wife whose final passivity becomes a gesture of revolt against her oppressor.

Such a plot summary does not convey, however, the subtleties of the narrative, the relationships that are established at the outset, between Delia's work and Sykes' hatred. The initial scene depicts Delia on a spring Sunday night sorting out the soiled clothes while she wonders about Sykes' whereabouts and, where he had taken her horse. Suddenly, "something long, round, limp and black fell upon her shoulders" (p.40). Taking it for a snake, Delia is paralyzed by terror, until she recognizes the big bull whip that Sykes carries, and Sykes himself, standing by the,door,highly amused with her fear. When Delia warns him that he should not drive her rig around, Sykes becomes furious and directs his hatred and aggressiveness at the pile of assorted clothes. He kicks them together again and then steps hard upon the whitest pile, scattering them all over the room. The scene synthesizes

the elements necessary for a lucid understanding of Hurston's perception of white oppression as a material force shaping the power relations in a black marriage. The conflict ensuing from the black female's relative economic independence and the black man's socio-economic powerlessness in a white society that links masculinity with access to power and status, obviously lurks in the background as a determining element in the quality of their relationship.

Unemployed, Sykes sees Delia's work as a constant reminder of his own inadequacy, a threat to his sense of manhood which he in vain wants to assert by claiming the ownership of Delia's house. This feeling of dependency that robs him of economic authority in the home, a prerogative that fits the traditional patriarchal image of manhood, is the psychological reflex of an historical situation: the marginalization of the black man who has been "stripped by society of his authority, pride and manhood."[22] Sykes' frustrations at her economic advantage is momentarily released by undoing her work. The symbolic underpinning of the image of white people's clothes can hardly remain unnoticed at this point. It is not only the material sign of Sykes' vulnerability vis-à-vis Delia's role as the economic provider, but it is also a reminder of his allotted inferior status within a system which, from slavery up to the present, has been ruled by the white master class. The overbearing weight of historical elements that stubbornly keep on intruding and molding Sykes's personality, his actions and reactions, are not, however, lifted by his symbolic gesture of trampling on the clothes. They are assimilated into the realm of human relationships where Sykes systematically exorcises them by gratifying his ego by super macho behavior.

Sykes epitomizes the woman's oppressor, both in physical and emotional terms. Such a role lays bare the significance of his throwing the bull whip which 'looks like a snake' at Delia. In the context of the narrative, the snake is referred to as "Old Satan," an explicit

image of evil according to the framework of Christian symbolism. As such, the snake poses a direct threat to Delia's faith. Yet, this interpretation does not address the focal point of the story, that is, relationships defined by oppression and subordination. In this case, it would make more sense to reground this image in the context of African folklore where the snake is considered a phallic symbol.[23] Hence, as a symbol par excellence of masculine power, the image is restored to its true function in the narrative, that is, to highlight the form by which Sykes attempts to terrorize Delia so as to drive her away from the home.

Delia's reactions, first to the pretend snake and then to the real one which Sykes pens in a box and leaves on the kitchen steps, convey no less than her fear of Sykes' unbriddled sexuality.[24] The possibility of sex based on hatred rather than mutual affection is a strong motive to raise a woman's fear and it is very likely that Sykes, who seems to understand the rudiments of female psychology, exploits this fear for his own advantage. Delia, in her turn, has put up with Sykes' sexual prowess with other women, but the text raises doubts about whether she would stand this ultimate form of self-debasement. The absence of details about Sykes' treatment of Delia in forms other than that of beatings and economic exploitation substantiates such a reading of the text, and suggests the importance of that actual moment as the decisive turning-point in their harrowing marriage.

Fifteen years in a considerably long period for any woman to endure the slings and arrows of hard work, infidelity, physical and psychological suffering. Delia's appearance attests well to her daily struggle. Her "thin, stooped shoulders," "her poor little body, her bare knuckly hands" (p.40) and "muscled limbs" (p.41), sum up a life of sacrifice which she herself assesses in terms of "'Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat'" (p.40). The men at Joe Clarke's store comment on her chattel status as she drives past

them on her way to deliver and collect clothes: "'Too much knockin' will ruin any 'ooman. He done beat tuh'nough tuh kill three women, let 'lone change they looks'" (p.41). But it is Joe Clarke himself who apprehends the insidious dynamics at work in Sykes' behavior:

> 'There's plenty men dat takes a wife lak dey do a joint uh sugar cane. It's round, juicy and sweet when dey gits. But dey squeeze an' grind, squeeze an' grind an' wring tell dey wring every drop uh pleasure dats in 'em out. When dey's satisfied dat dey is wrung dry, dey treats em jes lak dey do a cane-chew. Dey throws 'em away. Dey knows whut dey is doin' while dey is at it, an' hates theirselves fuh it but they keeps on hanging 'after huh tell she's empty. Den they hates huh fuh bein' a cane-chew an' in de way' (p.42).

Because Sykes takes Delia's passivity and subjection for granted, he is totally unprepared to confront the resolute and defensive woman who emerges towards the end of the first scene, a woman determined to keep what had cost her sweat and blood. Her little home with the flowers and trees she herself had planted is the last stronghold among "the debris that cluttered their matrimonial trail" (p.41), and Delia is not willing to give it up. Arguing fiercily about her rights to the house, Delia, for the first time in her life, experiences a small victory when, grabbing an iron skillet, she succeeds in intimidating Sykes who "did not strike her as he usually did" (p.41). Yet, he does find a way of attacking her so as to vent his rage. He rejects her general appearance thus proving Joe Clarke's wisdom: "'Gawd! how Ah hates skinny wimmen'"(p.41).[25]

As the narrative unfolds, the rascality of Sykes' behavior in further indicated by the superior and deferential attitude he assumes towards his lover, partly meant to humiliate Delia in public. Self-conceited and with an urgent need to bolster his ego, Sykes not only considers himself the owner of the town, but also "the swellest man in the state" (p.42). Old Man Anderson, one among the crowd on Clarke's porch, probes into one of the

reasons for Sykes' attitude, a reason which echoes a similar idea present in the previous story -- the view of the northern negative influence upon the southern black: "'He allus wus uh ovabearing niggah, but since dat white 'oman from up north done teached 'im how to run a automobile, he done got to biggety to live'"(p.42). The townsmen, in general, disapprove of Sykes' ruthlessness towards Delia. But like their peers in "Spunk," their moral judgments are mouthstatements that do not rise above the purely rhetorical, which shows the evident powerlessness of the male community to take action as a whole. Or else, what lies incubated at the bottom of its inertia is the inability to act against one of its own!

Delia's ordeal becomes excrutiating with the presence of the snake in the home, a presence which, as discussed above, is literally and symbolically associated with a threat of defilement. The psychological strength that Hurston imparts to Delia's character is evident in the development of her personality. Delia gradually becomes a strong and determined black woman whose pain and fear are metamorphosed into a solid resistance against intrusion and violation of her private space, an attitude that obviously opposes Sykes' manly posture. There is no ambiguity about where she stands just as there is no chance she will assume her former subjection. Her words carry the burden of a new and ineradicable feeling:

> 'Lay 'round wid dat 'oman all yuh wants tuh but gwan 'way fum me an' mah house. Ah hates yuh lak uh suck-egg dog.
> Don't think Ah'm gointuh be run 'way fum mah house neither. Ah'm goin' tuh de white folks about you, mah young man, de very nex' time you lay yo' han's on me. Mah cup is done run ovah.' (p.43).

The reference to white folk's aid corroborates what was said above about the ineffectiveness of the black male community. It also suggests the lack of

real solidarity and sympathy for the plight of this black woman whose appeals are more likely to be heard by whites than by the members of her group. This passage contains vestiges of an earlier story, "Drenched in Light," where the appearances of whites relieves the black girl of physical punishment.

As the narrative moves to its climactic ending, it focuses on Delia's struggle to overcome "her wall of inhibitions"(p.44), feelings that persist in refracting her fifteen years of emotional subservience. As a religious woman, Delia has lived up to the Christian beliefs in the acceptance of present suffering, forgiveness and hope for better days. Yet, this part of her heritage seems no longer to address her present reality and needs. So, when in one evening she finds the snake "pouring his awful beauty from the basket upon the bed" (p.44), she is forced to confront the shocking reality of her marriage as a conflict where her life as well as her personhood are at stake. Sykes' satanic power is crystallized in the snake's drowsiness and its gradual vigorous movements on the bed, an imagery whose sexual connotation leaves no doubt as to the nature of the menace Sykes poses to Delia.

Running away from the house, Delia becomes a "gibbering wreck." But not for long. Her fear is replaced by "coherent thought" and transformed into a "bloody rage" (p.44) that cancels out any trace left of her meekness. In the morning, when Sykes enters the house, possibly to look for her body, Delia, from her hideout, knows that he is just reaping his sowing. The commotion of the mortal struggle going on inside makes her sick, so she retreats to her flower-beds where she "stretched herself on the cool earth to recover" (p.45).

The last scene is rendered with a dramatic poignancy never achieved in any other work by Hurston. The poised detachment of the narrative voice conveys the inevitability of the moment, suggesting at the same time the awful dimension of a human drama reaching its denouement under the indifference of the natural world:

"She never moved, he called, and the sun kept rising" (p.45). Delia could have prevented Sykes' death, either by warning him of the peril or by giving him assistance, or, she could have let him know that she forgave him, granting him, at least, a peaceful death. Instead, she becomes the embodiment of passivity. This paralysis and lack of volition, is transformed by the sequence of events, into a highly subversive gesture in that it moves Delia into an unsanctioned realm where christian-ethical imperatives simply do not exist. What rules supreme in this realm is the vitality of feelings, of visceral human response towards oppression which, for the moment, outweighs any consideration of precepts by which society defines its model for proper moral conduct. Delia's omission accentuates her distance from the group of which she is a part.

No judgement hovers along the narrative line nor is there any textual evidence of Delia's experiencing any guilt or regret over her attitude. These feelings remain only a slight possibility in the context of Delia's gained knowledge: the awareness that Sykes dies knowing the full extent of her hate:

> ... She could scarcely reach the Chinaberry tree, where she waited in the growing heat while inside she knew the cold river was creeping up and up to extinguish that eye which must know that she knew (p.45).

Although the story ends without illuminating Delia's reactions to her important insight, there are no grounds for claiming a tragic dimension for Delia's character.[26] Her knowledge does not effect a shattering of her world nor does she surrender her sense of self to the traps of a meaningless despair. On the contrary, her knowledge reverberates with a sense of power and finality consolidated, at last, in her final gesture, her holding on to the chinaberry tree. The tree, that opposes the river of death that stirs inside, represents vitality and life, the reality principle of Delia's world.

Unlike "Spunk" and "Muttsy", "Sweat" is a story in which Hurston deals explicitly with woman's oppression within a social order that assumes woman's subordination as a 'fait accompli.' The ideological determination that underlines her treatment of the subject matter forces the reader to acknowledge that, within the framework of the story, evil is not an abstract theological concept visualized for didactic purposes. It is a concrete historical factor that, unchained by a structure of white domination and black subjection, intruded into the black home to unbalance relationships and to reproduce the class dichotomy that constitutes the main feature of the capitalist society: the oppressor and the oppressed.

Hurston's committment to disclosing the truth of what remains, more often than not, concealed in the anonymity of the marriage façade, is inseparable from the propaganda effect of her story, propaganda that evolves naturally out of her depiction of the real and which articulates a vehement protest against the degrading situation inflicted upon black womanhood. Nowhere is her critical posture more evident than in the story's ironic outcome. The male oppressor is neutralized and his means of oppression are used against him, bringing his downfall and, consequently, allowing the woman to be.

The radicalism present in "Sweat" and absent in the other stories, can only be understood in the context of the particular moment of its writing. Written for and published in FIRE I, the text was germane to the magazine's ideological committment to the proletariat, to the social and economical struggle of the black lower class, as opposed to the bourgeois concerns espoused by Locke and other writers such as Fauset and Larsen. As one of its founders, Hurston was conscious of the possibilities for self-expression in a new channel for the Negro voice, that would not only invigorate the aesthetic quality of the black movement but also would add a fresh insight into the black situation from a

different point of view, the point of view of a woman. In the story's carefully crafted narrative, Hurston's consciousness as an artist coincides with her consciousness as a black woman to the extent that the narrative's artistic intention leads to an unequivocal statement about the status of the black woman in a sexist environment and about her awakening to the possibility of overturning the order that keeps her down. The unmistakable intentionality that characterizes "Sweat" is not immediately visible in "Spunk," for instance, where the marks of containment reflect, even though obliquely, the historrical priority given by the black movement to the reconstruction of the identity of the black man to the detriment of the black woman's concerns about her identity.[27] The narrative maneuver in "Sweat" lies precisely in the reversal of this priority, which reveals the text's confrontation with history.

On the one hand, the text is a response to the male bias of the Black Renaissance. Its resolution suggests the beginning of a movement towards freedom, ideologically encoded in the image or the chinaberry tree, a symbol of life, strength and durability that charts the space where Delia belongs and where she can be herself. On the other hand, a careful scrutiny of the multiple meanings that converge in this single image discloses a meaning that restrains the thrust towards freedom that informs the narrative's movement. The most elemental aspect of the tree is its nature, fixed, rooted, stationary. This suggests that, qualitatively, the tree image does not contain the possibilities of the 'horizon' recurrent in Hurston's first stories, where it evokes expansion and mobility, becoming a metaphor for self-fulfillment and freedom. This conflicting accumulated meaning of "Sweat's" final image unfolds what is not said, not given an effective utterance in the narrative, that is, liberation, for the black woman, is only a possibility within the boundaries of her private world. By all means, her space is circumscribed by controlling social forces, the male-dominant community and the racist

society at large, that prevent the acting out of whatever sense of freedom and personhood she experiences in her private sphere. Freedom from domestic despotism does not mean freedom from the pressures of the group and from racial oppression.

This interpretive argument -- that considers the weight of the image's meanings in relation to the meaning imparted to the character's action -- does not mean to deflate the significance of Delia's movement, but to see it within the realistic framework created by the tree, the point of reference and convergence of her actions. Such a reading of "Sweat" shows that Hurston, in spite of her almost militant posture, did not envision the possibility of the black woman's becoming a subject and altering the external conditions that, perpetuated by a double system of domination, assigned the black woman a subordinate status and denied her personhood.

"The Gilded Six-Bits,"[28] a story written just before Hurston began working on her first novel, is about a marriage relationship which, seemingly strong and authentic at first, faces deterioration as a result of the wife's one act of infidelity, only to recover a painfully-gained balance at the end, with the birth of a male first child. The simplicity of the plotline and the reserved attitude of the narrator, who limits herself to a mere observation and description of the events, may lead the reader to take for granted the deceptive appearance of a love story. Yet, a critical reading is bound to dispel its innocent quality, for this is a story in which the events encompass a level of reality not readily observable in their articulation alone but which depend on the reader's perceptive assimilation of the characters' interaction, motivations and discourse.

At the center of the narrative lies the episode of the seduction/submission of the young wife who has never for a moment questioned her love for her husband and who, nevertheless, gives herself to a stranger in exchange for a gold watch charm. The episode raises the inevitable question as to why, what reasons, besides the

naively acknowledged one,' could lead to such a flagrant betrayal of the bond of trust between a man and a woman who claim mutual love and affection. The search for an answer sustains a way of appropriating the story that allows what lies buried beneath the surface of the events to emerge and constitute the principle that informs the narrative's intentionality. From this point of view, while the story talks about love, infidelity and regained love, the discourse unfolds the process of victimization of a married woman to the internalized role of the ideal wife, and the surrender of her self-worth and personal integrity to gain an object-like status in the home. She becomes not only an object of manipulation on the part of the husband but also a prey for an opportunist who is set upon living up to his reputation as an irresistible Don Juan.

From the very beginning, the world of "The Gilded Six-Bits" is defined by the sexual division of labor, which delimits the masculine and the feminine roles, and, consequently, qualifies their relationship as relations of domination and subordination. Joe Banks works for the Fertilizer Company while Missie May does the domestic work and plays her feminine role on her husband's return from work. She is warm, responsive and ready to serve his needs promptly. Her environment is her home: the yard carefully raked, the porch and steps scrubbed white, the kitchen filled with the aroma of freshly cooked food. As it always happens on Saturday afternoons, Missie knows Joe is coming from work on hearing the noise of silver dollars in the door, coins which Joe throws "for her to pick up and pile beside her plate at dinner" (p.75). This ritual, Joe's presence being equated with the sound of money, is followed by a mock battle in which he indulgently pampers Missie by letting her go through his pockets to find the goods, especially the candy kisses he always brings her. (In special, candy kisses.)

The goods are obvious little compensations for Missie's lonely nights [Joe works the night shift] and, perhaps, also an advance for her services on his only

night off. The veiled sexual undertone of the battle reaches a pitch and is, at the same time, jolted, when Joe exclaims: "'Whew! dat play-fight done got me all warmed up! ... Got me some water in the kittle?'"(p.76) Here, the disposition for love is unexpectedly replaced by other needs, such as bathing and eating, needs that Missie readily fulfills while she claims, as if to convince herself: "'Ah'm a real wife, not no dress and breath'" (p.76).

For all their bantering and gestures of affection, there is something awry in their relationship. Joe's actions, though amicable, underscore Missie's subservience and his speeches resonate with a patronizing attitude which hides the assertion of his male authority: "'Nope, sweetenin' is for us menfolks. Y'all pritty lil frail eels don't need nothin' lak dis...'" (p.76). Because of her conditioning, Missie May does not question her role and her marriage nor is she aware of the real conditions that mold their interpersonal emotionality. For her, love, sexuality and money are strangely intertwined, material and immaterial intimately related at the level of her perceptions, of her marriage and of her role. A consideration of the events that preceded her adultery and the adultery itself must take into account this essential aspect of Missie's personality.

On that same saturday evening, Joe invites her to go to the ice-cream store owned by a swell of a man from Chicago named Otis D. Slemmons. Immediately, Missie identifies the newcomer as "'dat heavyset man wid his mouth full of gold teeth'" (p.77). Her recollection of this particular detail suggests the impact his physical appearance has caused on her. At this moment, she discloses the circumstances of her encounter with Slemmons, an incidental greeting while she was scouring the front-door steps. Her simple-minded description leaves no doubt as to the fact that Slemmons has deliberately followed her as well as it gives a quaint impression of a certain interest on her part: "'Ah thought Ah never seen <u>him</u> befo'" (p.77). Without grasping the impli-

cations of Missie's account, Joe's response provides the spark in the light of which her subsequent behavior can be better understood. Literally under the spell of Slemmons' privileged status in the town, Joe cannot silence his jealousy of a man who is impeccably dressed, is successful with women everywhere he goes, and, above all, flaunts his personal pride through an assortment of gold piece adornments. His wistful remarks, "'Wisht Ah had a build on me lak he got,'" of "'Sho wisht it wus mine'" [referring to the gold] (p.77), are too obtrusive to be dismissed as inconsequential and show the extent to which Joe, the poor rural labourer, feels diminished in comparison to this rich and smart urban Negro. As if to compensate for his low self-esteem, Joe thinks he can outrank Slemmons by exhibiting the only thing he owns, Missie: "'Go 'head now, honey, and put on yo'clothes. He talkin' 'bout his pritty womens - Ah want 'im to see mine'" (p.78). Unwittingly, Missie becomes the sexual image, the beautiful object with which Joe establishes a sense of competition with Slemmons, a way to rescue his hurt pride.

What Joe cannot forestall is that, by parading Missie in Slemmons' store, he is exposing her to his influence and this influence addresses the one aspect of Missie's conditioning into her role as a wife: money. It is as a dutiful wife ready to enhance the husband's ego that Missie states: "'Dat's de first time Ah ever seed gold money. It lookted good on him sho nuff, but it'd look a whole heap better on you'" (p.79). Their conversation following this statement clearly suggests that Missie is contriving the means to get hold of some gold money, by subtle alluding to Slemmons and the women he says he got, among other signs. Sex in exchange for money seems to her a natural form of relationship between a man and a woman. In a way, she is acting out what she has imbibed from her relation with Joe, and what is more, according to her simplistic rationale, she is doing it for *his* sake.

However, given the circumstances of her married

life, it is a fallacy to regard her surrender to Slemmons as just a means of making Joe's wish come true. Her conduct must be seen partly as a result of Joe's attitude, literally throwing her in Slemmons' path, partly as a response to the conditions of her whole life. While the former implies a passive assimilation of external pressures, the latter implies a more complex psychological reaction where sexual infidelity becomes an aggressive act that bespeaks an inarticulate loneliness and emptiness that cannot be filled out with silver dollers or by outdressing any woman in town. Poor and uneducated, constricted in a private and narrow world, Missie does not have access to language to verbalize her condition. So, she expresses it with her body, using it unconsciously as a deviant tool to escape the limiting scope of her husband's Saturday nights and his self-assurance that "all, everything, was right'" (p.79) in his marriage.

Because Missie is handicapped in understanding the underlying motive of her behavior and because it is never raised to a level of conscious thought, she sounds incoherent when trying to justify herself at the moment she is caught with Slemmons in her bedroom. In her outburst of confusion, she tries to mumble some reasons, as her love for Joe and the fact that Slemmons had kept on after her. What she fails to consider is her own role and responsibility vis-a-vis her painful experience. Locked in the walled space of her feelings for Joe, Missie lacks consciousness of her self as a woman, a human being entitled to being more than a sexual object of man's lust. Her response to Joe's laughter, rage and persistent silence conforms to the stereotype of femininity, that is, it dwells on the emotional level alone. She cries and sobs, succumbing to an overwhelming guilt that leaves her speechless when Joe ironically informs her that he had got the payment for her. On striking Slemmons, the golden watch charm on a broken chain had clutched on to Joe's fist.

In the three months that followed, their relation-

ship is deadlocked. Even though Missie realizes they have become strangers and so recoils from familiar habits in his presence, like getting up and dressing, she lacks courage to bring her apprehensions into action. Devoid of a will of her own, she reduces herself into a walking shadow who has to put off death because she must fill in needs: "No need to die today. Joe needed her for a few more minutes anyhow" (p.82). Her acquiescence is, in a way, an expected result of the cycle of the male politics of power. Choosing not to leave her and yet, not making a gesture of forgiveness, Joe exploits Missie's weakness, in terms of services which, as a form of expiation is also a form of pointing to her powerlessness and subservient, if not demeaning, role in the household. One evening, when Joe asks Missie to rub his back with liniment to ease his pain, she is grateful for their physical rapprochement and a night together. In the morning, she finds the gold piece beneath her pillow which, after close inspection, turns out to be a mere gilded half dollar. Realizing then how Slemmons had cheated her and everybody in town, she broods, however, on the meaning of Joe's gesture. At first, she deludes herself only to be shortly awakened to the awful reality it yields:

> Perhaps he was through with her punishment. They were man and wife again. Then another thought came clawing at her. He had come home to buy from her as if she were any woman in the long house. Fifty cents for her love. As if to say that he could pay as well as Slemmons. (p.83).

Unable to withstand this ultimate form of debasement and humiliation, she leaves "his house"; But she returns shortly after meeting Joe's mother because she is determined to keep up the appearances: "Never would she admit defeat to that woman who prayed for it nightly" (p.83).

Hurston's awareness of the tension holding the marriage's emotional scales preserves the narrative from

leaning towards the sentimental or melodramatic. Missie's pregnancy is disclosed with economy and a fine sense of the stressful circumstances of their present relationship in a scene that evokes her pitiful womanhood and Joe's recalcitrant hostility:

> "'You ain't got no business choppin' wood, and you know it.'
> 'How come? Ah been choppin' it for the last longest.'
> 'Ah ain't blind. You makin' feet for shoes.'
> 'Won't you be glad to have a lil baby chile, Joe?'
> 'You know dat 'thout astin' me.'
> 'Iss gointer be a boy chile and de very spit of you.'
> 'You reckon, Missie May.'
> 'Who else could it look lak?'
>
> Joe said nothing, but he thrust his hand deep into his pocket and fingered something there" (p.84).

Joe's suspicion is only lifted when six months later, Missie delivers a baby boy who, his mother assures him, "'Sho is de spittin' image of yuh, son'" (p.84). Reconciliation effectively takes place on a Saturday when Joe goes to Orlando and buys fifty cents worth of candy kisses with the gilded money. Back in Eatonville and approaching his front door, he makes Missie aware of his coming with the familiar ring of singing metal on wood. The last scene suggests the survival of their marriage but the reader wonders at what cost.

On entering the sphere of reproduction and bearing a child who resembles Joe, Missie gains his approval. She is then accepted as wife again, but not because of her personal worth but because she is the bearer of a son, which means she is a buttress for Joe's own [masculine] self-image. A first-born male child in a male-run culture that devaluates womanhood to reinforce the male identity, is a symbol of status, of achievement. Thus, the baby boy comes to address Joe's ego needs.

Underneath the trappings of renewal, the marriage displays an unequal balance of forces, a power context in which love can only assume corrupted form: ownership

and control instead of mutuality and cooperation. Joe's final gesture, innocent as it seems to be, is tainted with an attitude of patronage that lays out the nature of their relationship. The tenderness underlying his decision to buy candy kisses is undercut by his throwing the money in the front door, an action that displays his dominant role as breadwinner and legitimizes Missie's emotional and economic dependency on him. Deprived of personhood by a sex-role system that perpetuates her subordinate position, Missie internalizes her 'otherness' and embraces her oppression in an impersonal world where the distinction between the cash nexus and human feelings has been blurred.

If the tone of the story is lighthearted and even humorous, the picture it conveys is bleak and stifling. The woman exists to fulfill needs, to be publicly seen (and coveted) by other and privately owned by one. Hurston leads the reader to question the 'happy' marriage by an ingenious device. Towards the very end of the story, the clerk from the store where Joe buys candy kisses, remarks to the next customer: "'Wisht I could be like these darkies. Laughin' all the time. Nothin' worries 'em'" (p.85). These statements, which feed on the racial stereotype of the happy-go-lucky Negro, provide an ironic contrast to the content of the story. The use of irony means to call the reader's attention to the inevitable discrepancy between conventional outward appearances and the human reality, and as such, it fosters a last insight into the marriage relationship of "The Gilded Six-Bits," by stimulating the reader to apply the terms of contrast in a final evaluation of Joe's and Missie's marriage. To the same extent that the clerk's remarks cannot be accepted at their face value because of their lopsided perspective on the black reality, so the reader cannot take for granted the final image of the happy and vigorous marriage relationship. The apparent sense of well-being in the end, conceals the sad reality of a woman's definitive surrender to the myth of woman's place.

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NOTES TO CHAPTER II

[1] According to Robert Hemenway in Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography (Chicago: University of Illinois Pres, 1977), p.86, conscious or formal art "grows primarily from the presumption of the written heritage" while a traditional art arises out of a group's communicative behavior, and is mostly verbal in nature.

[2] According to Sterling Brown in "Negro Folk Expression" in Black Expression, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969), p.5, the telling of tales, for example, was a honored custom in Africa. Lawrence W. Levine in Black Culture and Black Consciousness (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.30, affirms that slavery "was never a complete system of psychic assault that it prevented the slaves from carrying out independent cultural forms."

[3] Donald A. Petesch, "The Role of Folklore in the Modern Black Novel," Kansas Quarterly, vol. 7, (Sum. 1975) nº 3, p.100.

[4] Zora N. Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" in Negro: An Anthology, ed. Nancy Cunard (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1970), p.24. This essay, probably written in 1930 according to Robert Hemenway (p.161), was Hurston's first attempt to systematize her profound knowledge of Negro folk expression. Five years later, Hurston produced the collection of Black folklore entitled Mules and Men, the product of the extensive research and field work conducted between 1927-1932, under the supervision of Franz Boas.

[5] Conjure practices center on the belief in the magical power of a conjurer or hoodoo doctor who can control and change situations out of the range of the common man's control.

[6] Hemenway, 62.

[7] Hemenway, 119.

[8] Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology (Norfolk: Lowe & Brydone Printers Limited, 1976), p.55.

[9] "John Redding Goes to Sea." Stylus, 1 (May, 1921), 11-22. Reprinted in Opportunity, 4 (Jan., 1926), 16-21. All quotes in the present essay are from the Opportunity text.

[10] "Drenched in Light." Opportunity, 2 (Dec., 1924), 371-374. All quotes in the present essay are from this text.

[11] Robert Staples, The Black Woman in America (Chicago, IL.: Nelson-Hall In., 1973), p.43. Staples defines the process of socialization as designed to conditioning the individual to the behavior pattern of the society in which he lives. He says that it is through this process that human beings "acquire their knowledge of sex and the particular values they come to hold in relation to it."

[12] Down Home (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), p.146.

[13] Gerda Lerner, Black Women in White America (New York: Random House, 1972), p.280.

[14] "Spunk." Opportunity, 3 (June, 1925), 171-73. Reprinted in The New Negro, edited by Alain Locke, pp. 105-11. New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1925. All quotes in the present essay are from the later text.

[15] According to Hemenway, p.68.

[16] I am indebted here to Pierre Macherey's critical concept of the 'non dit' of the literary text in A Theory of Literary Production (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978). As Macherey argues, "to explain the work is to show that, contrary to all appearances, it does not exist for itself, but on the contrary, bears within itself the mark of determinate absence which is also the principle ot its identity" (p.98). Terry Eagleton in his article "Pierre Macherey and The Theory of Literay Production," (Minnesota Review, 5, Fall 1975) discusses the central argument developed by Macherey, the notion that the literary work consists not in the elaboration of a single meaning but in the conflict and incompatibility of several meanings. And he adds, after Macherey: " ... That conflict, moreover, is precisely what binds the work to reality: ideology is present in the text in the form of its eloquent silences, its significant gaps and fissures" (p.137).

[17] In a Minor Chord (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 98.

[18] "Muttsy." Opportunity, 4 (Aug., 1926), 246-50. All quotes are from the present text.

[19] The Souls of Black Folk (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1969), p.224.

[20] Fred DeArmond, "A Note on the Sociology of Negro Literature," Opportunity, 3-4 (Dec. 1925), p. 370.

[21] "Sweat." FIRE!, 1 (Nov., 1926), 40-45. All quotes are from this text.

[22] Daryl C. Dance, "Black Eve or Madonna?," in Sturdy Black Bridges, ed. Roseann Bell, Bettye Parker and Beverly Sheftall (New York: Doubleday, 1979), p. 127.

[23] According to Robert Staples, The Black Woman in America), p. 74.

[24] As R. Ruether contends in New Woman, New Earth (New York: Seabury Press, In., 1978), p. 126, historically, "the 'impotency' of the black male did not affect him sexually," which supports Robert Staples' statement in The Black Family (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1971): "... Black women, domineering or not, have not had the power in this male-dominated culture to effect a coup against anyone's manhood - in spite of her oft-cited economic 'advantage' over the black man" (p.143).

[25] The fact that fiction provides a certain access to reality by way of giving us socially determined representations of the real, is nowhere more visible than in this passage. Again, it is relevant to quote Staples: "Having a job provides relief for her [the black woman's] stomach but not for her soul, for black woman's successful coping with the economic problem enhances her rejection by black men, or else invites acceptance in the form of exploitation" (p.143).

[26] Robert Hemenway contends in Zora Neal Hurston, p. 72, that the story is Delia's tragedy too, since at the end "a burden is not lifted but newly imposed," meaning that Delia succumbs to the tragic weight of her knowledge.

[27] This fact in itself helps us to understand why "Spunk" was included in Locke's anthology. Had Hurston submitted a story of the quality of "Sweat" at that particular moment, it would have been most probably rejected for not being attuned to the mood of the movement.

[28] "The Gilded Six-Bits" in The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers, Langston Hughes, ed. Boston: Little Brown & Company, Inc., 1967.

III - THE EATONVILLE PHASE: IN SORROW'S KITCHEN

Hurston's first two novels, Jonah's Gourd Vine, published in May 1934, and Their Eyes Were Watching God, published in the fall of 1937, take up the stylistic and thematic patterns established in her short stories. The style is bathed in the vivid metaphorical imagination of folk expression that, on reproducing the rituals and behavior of the community, captures the unique quality of African-American folklife. But these novels go on to expose the simple, romantic façade of rural black southern life[1] by seizing upon and probing the reality of the black woman's life under a patriarchal system that endorses a master/slave relationship in the home, translating thus into the sphere of heterosexual relations, the parameters of a racist, sexist and class society where rich exploit poor, white exploit colored and men exploit women.

Hurston's handling and treatment of the circumstances that determine the quality of the black woman's life, her functioning as female according to prescribed sexual roles and patterns of behavior often enforced by the threat of physical abuse, are informed by a particular ideological stance that definitely questions the legitimacy of male rule, the ideology of sexism and its value system insidiously at work in the midst of the black community. Even though woman's oppression antedates the development of the human community within a historical framework, for Hurston, the material basis for the black woman's oppression is more clearly defined in terms of the conditions created by the institution of slavery. Its shadow still hangs over the black community setting the mood for the domestic scene, where racism, though in a diluted and elusive form, manifests itself in sexist terms. In this sense, both novels

evince the scope of Hurston's insight. They provoke a series of subtle parallels between the operation of patriarchy and other forms of control, such as race and class domination.

In the period that extends from the end of the Reconstruction to the first two decades of the Twentieth Century, the range of the novels' historical time, Hurston's black woman speaks of a new phase in the development of her role in the family and in her relationship with the black community. This new phase does not necessarily imply a relinquishment of her vital role in the survival of the black family, in particular, her devotion to the functions of mothering and protecting her children in a hostile environment. But it unquestionably stands for a new awareness of her own self, of her frustrations and aspirations vis-à-vis the content of her personal experiences within a system of male domination, a system that circumscribes her world and sets limits for the realization of her human potential.

Hurston's sensitivity towards her female characters made her introject the black woman's historical tradition in both the depiction and treatment of them. As Addison Gayle Jr. states, "she views them as modern women, patterned upon paradigms of the past, those of the courage and strength of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth."[2] What Gayle Jr. implies in his statement is the multidimensionality of Hurston's female characters. On the one hand, Hurston sympathetically discloses the infinite humanity of personalities neither brutalized by oppression nor distorted by fear. They are peculiarly lucid about the general and specific circumstances that impinge on their lives. They are quick-witted, strong and resourceful, qualities that have enabled them to survive and to endure under the harshest economical situations and under the most painful emotional stress. On the other hand, Hurston's fictional images invite the reader to recognize the 'other' reality that underlies the everyday life of the black woman: her help-

lessness and suffering facing the bursts of pent-up anger of the black man; the denial of her sexuality and her entrappment in the biological role, channeling all her expression into the breeding of children; and, her attempt, unconscious, at first, to create a language that structures her experience and speaks of her condition.

As Hurston's black woman makes an effort to break through the marginality assigned to her by the politics of patriarchal authority that has socialized her into inferiority, she is concomitantly making a stand for an equalitarian role, in and outside the private sphere; she is asserting a claim for recognition as a participant subject in the black cultural process. Most certainly, they are "the leavening rods of change, from whose loins will eventually come the new man."[3]

Before plunging into the particularities of each novel, it is necessary that one makes a historical retrospect in order to grasp the material basis of the forces operating upon the family and marital relationships in the post-slavery folk community, the lansdcape of Hurston's fictional scrutny. Such an examination will lead to a more comprehensive understanding, at the grass-root level, of Hurston's perceptions, of the reasons why her fiction consistently raises the question of black manhood as one of the main factors underlying the oppression of the black woman.

As Nathan Irvin Huggins points out, the traditional family in Africa "extended itself beyond the nuclear group, linking in mutual obligation much of the village itself ... Dependency was reciprocal: one took from all, and eveyone was sustained by one's substance. Individualism and mobility were not valued in such a context."[4] During the slavery experience, there was a break with this tradition. The slave family was undermined by the slaveholder's economic interest. Although the slave resisted isolation and kept a strong sense of bond to kinfolks,[4] the possibility of stabilizing family life and even of keeping its members together

was very much reduced as a consequence of the selling away of men, women and children. The black woman had more chances of staying with her children than did the father, and this fact explains the basis for her close ties and attachment to them. The black man's status as husband and father was, most of the time, not legally sanctioned. Under the white tutelage, he was socially and psychologically stripped of his identity and only with difficulty assumed the role of economic provider and protector of his kin. If during slavery, little of male dominance existed in the slave cabins,[6] with Emancipation, masculine authority was roughly established in the black home. Victimized by both caste and class, the black man could not challenge the white man to assert his power and control in a society where these were valued and considered to be the parameters of male identity. This uncertainty about role and his fears of emasculation, made him turn to the only element he could beat on: the black woman. Thus, the power struggle within the black family reveals a simplistic yet horrifying truth: power and control over the black woman often became the only means by which he could prove himself to himself and to others, and, consequently, attain some kind of leverage with the white man, even if only in sexual terms.[7]//The attitudes underlining sexual relations became competitive among peers and exploitative of black women for these were the visible signs of masculinity, the attainment of which was emphasized by the group to counterweigh the mechanisms of a society that has always tried to suppress black manhood.[8] Robert Staples explains and assesses the black male's personality:

> Lacking the institutionalized means for goal achievement in American society, he found ego gratification and social approval by continuing to carry out the role of a super-stud. This self-concept as a sexual being stemmed from the lack of alternative sources of status in a society bent on depriving him of his manhood. Sex became then, not only a source of physical pleasure but a means of status acquisition within the context

of the Black community.[9]

Finally, with the end of slavery, Blacks entered into different social relations with whites. Their new economic relation with the White landord, in the share-cropping system, for example, also contributed to the support of the black man's status, his leadership in the family.[10] He assumed all the responsibility for the contracts made. Hence, his material interest in the labor power of the wife, not to mention in her reproductive capacity to provide him with free field help.

In this dynamic interplay of social and economic forces that helped to establish the white patriarchal marriage ethics among the black folk, lies the social and psychological determinants of the power hierarchy in the black family. The way black men lived out their social roles helped to establish the dominant form of social relations within the family: relations of dominance and subordination that qualifies patriarchy under the stress of racism. In this context, the organization of roles in the black family in America brought about a rupture between black folk and the traditional African family and community system where "There was no endemic antagonism between the sexes but rather a holistic approach to community organization out of which both men and women would find self-definition, security, continuity."[11] The absence of this harmonious relationship in the southern black community and its replacement by relations which have lost their animated sense of humanity, fostering personal frustrations and psychological deformities, qualifies the milieu from which Hurston's works draw their source and reference. Yet, it must be borne in mind, at this point, that the sociological elements examined above are not simply reproduced 'sine qua non' in Hurston's novels. Hurston's folk community is not just an imaginary transposition of the historical reality into fiction. It is the product of a fictional practice that refers to an ideological formation produced by the concrete situation above described and, that in

the process of laying out its significations, uncovers the underside of reality that they hide from view.[12] Hence, Hurston's fiction cuts across the layers of myth and needs that coalesce in the ideology of black manhood, and exposes its major role in buttressing the exploitation and victimization of the black woman after Emancipation.

Jonah's Gourd Vine,[13] is a story that renders the life of the folk community with an extraordinary narrative vitality and poignancy of perception that makes its reading a most compelling experience. The reader is drawn into its texture by the forcefullness of the dialogues and by an authorial voice that helps to create a center of interest around the female characters. The text immediately brings to the surface the contradiction between the black woman as an intelligent and perceptive human being and the degrading role she plays in the domestic arena.

// Basically, the novel's plotline is male-centered and it focuses on the life of John Pearce, a bastard mulatto child, offspring of a white master and a former slave, who rises from a life of poverty as an illiterate sharecropper in Alabama, to attain a socially prominent position as preacher, and, later, as mayor and moderator of a Baptist convention in Sanford, Florida. As early as the first chapter, the major flaw in his character is hinted at: his lust for women. Incapable of integrating his sexuality into his marriage due to his dichotomized view of women, and powerless to curb his passions even though he is revered as the spiritual leader of the community, John ruthlessly drives his wife to death, bringing distress and disarray among his children. From this moment on, he begins the journey to his downfall. His second marriage turns out to be a farce, a result of his former mistress' attempt to conjure him, and so ends up in a tumultuous divorce. Meanwhile, his position in the church hierarchy is threatened by the plotting of former friends who want to bring him down. Giving up the pulpit and moving

to another town where he marries for the third time, John surrenders yet, one more, to his sexually promiscuous bent. His tragic death in a car crash under the Florida sunrise is the final judgment on a man whose lack of self-awareness and dissociation of self turned him into an oppressor of black woman.

The linear development of the story derives its dynamics from the tension and animosity between the black man and the black woman, which reaches its highest pitch in the relationship of John Pearce and Lucy Potts. The depiction of the black marriage reveals the existence of a value system that reflects the patriarchal ethic of male supremacy and determines, for the black woman, an existence characterized by the discrepancy between necessity and fulfillment, marriage and affection, role and identity.

Suggestively, the narrative begins with the long scene of confrontation between Amy Crittendon, John's mother, and Ned, his stepfather. It is hardly an arbitrary choice on Hurston's part. In this carefully delineated dramatic portrait of the resentment that beset this union, she builds up the environment within which John spends his formative years and grows psychologically to maturity. The scene is striking enough by itself, but it acquires its significant function in establishing the context of the power relations in the black marriage after Emancipation and in anticipating the attitudes that play a vital role in the further development of the story.

The opening description thrusts us right into the midst of the folk community, whose ability to perceive the abstract in visual terms is adroitly captured by the narrator: "God was grumbling his thunder and playing the zig-zag lightning thru his fingers" (p.9). The threat of an approaching storm makes Amy restless as she worries about the children working out in the cotton fields, and so she advises her husband to call them in. Ned's response bears the marks of plain hostility. Not only does he cut her off by disparaging her perceptions,

"'Twain't gwine rain,' 'you always talkin' more'n yuh know,'" but he also acts grudingly towards her, ignores her address and even tramples on her bare foot as he cames inside to escape from the first heavy raindrops. His final words unveil his aggressiveness towards her: "'You needs uh good head stompin', dass whut. You sho is one aggervatin' 'oman'" (p.10). Amy's resentment is translated into an "angry look" to be quickly dispelled though, as she turns her face towards the wind-beaten cotton patch and calls out for her sons.

The overt lack of solidarity and companionship in this scene is an index of their twelve years of married life. Brutalized by his experience during slavery times, Ned has internalized the white oppressor's view of the black woman: she is a laborer and a breeder of children. Consequently, he cannot conceive of and treat her except in terms of her slave status. He sees himself with full rights to demand her servility, that is, that she performs dutifully the chores she is expected to perform. His one-dimensional perception of Amy and his denial of her humanity, is visible enough when he questions what kind of woman she is upon finding no water in the house for his needs.

Ned's attitudes allow the main feature of their relationship to emerge: the exploitation of the woman's work. Ned wants to assert his male authority by showing control over Amy's productive capacity. It is not enough that she slave herself in the fields. She must provide for his personal needs, upon demand. Facing the context of her marriage, Amy wavers between silence and rebellion, suppression and outburst. She has adjusted to putting up with Ned's cruelty, but she has also managed to keep a sense of her individuality that enables her to question his blind authority. Her words evolve out of a hard core of self that rejects vicarious living:

> 'How you speck me tuh work in de field right long side uh you and den have supper ready jis az soon ez Ah git tuh de house? Ah helt

> uh big-eye hoe in mah hand jez es long ez you did, Ned' (p.17).

Insensitive to the validity of her argument, Ned resents her intellectual energy and resorts to physical threats to enforce her subjection: "'Don't you change so many words wid me, 'oman! Ah'll knock yuh dead ez Hector. Shet yo' mouf'" (p.17).

This master-slave relationship extends over the children. It is clear that Ned exploits their labor power and demands a strict obedience to his orders. Amy refers to his poor performance as a cotton-picker in relation to the efficiency of the boys, which Ned is unwilling to admit. Instead, in his blindness, he sees himself victimized by a "' House full uh younguns fuh me to feed and close'" (p.14). Ned's rationale for his harsh treatment of his sons indicates the degree to which he has assimilated the psychology of oppression. For him, "'Niggers wuz made tuh work'" (p.16), so it is only natural that what was demanded from him once, must be demanded now from the boys. This simplistic and dehumanized view that short-circuits the historical process of black life in America, is contested by Amy whose understanding of past experience and present situation allows her to articulate what she considers to be blacks' obligation towards their children. Her simple wisdom feeds on the feelings that sustain a race's developing sense of peoplehood:

> '... We black follks don't love our chillum. We couldn't do it when we wuz in slavery. We borned 'em but dat didn't make 'em ourn. Dey b'longed tuh old Massa.' (...) 'But we's free folks now. (...)'Us chillen is ourn. Ah doan know, mebbe hit 'll take some of us generations, but us got tuh' gin tuh practise on treasurin' our younguns' (p.16).

Amy's protective attitude towards her children is particularly stressed in her relation with her oldest son John, the bastard child she brought into the marriage and upon whom Ned vents his racial hatred and

vexation. She jumps "like a black lioness" (p.12) to defend him against Ned's viciousness. Evidently, Ned's hatred of Amy is linked to the presence of this 'yellow nigger 'in the home. John represents the living memory of a past that, above all, meant the suppression of Ned's identity, his invisibility vis-à-vis the black woman and his lack of parental authority. The sight of John, his growth into manhood, is a constant provocation to his ego. By repudiating his mixed color and submitting him to his control, Ned attempts to efface John's individual identity.

Amy's capacity for critical thought and her larger view of human motives makes her grasp the reasons underlying Ned's behavior. In addition to the psychological stress, there is a strong economic reason: Ned has been cheated of his cotton share by his white landowner. Low self-esteem and poverty accentuate Ned's violent character. Amy discerns the disastrous affect of racial subservience "'... being he's uh white man you done whut he told yuh'" (17), and defiantly shows her self-reliance: "'Us wouldn't be in dis fix ef you had uh lissened tuh me'" (17). Here, through the point of view of a black woman, the historical situation created by slavery and perpetuated by a racism that is particularly manifested along economic lines, is evoked as a concrete element that interferes and shapes the relationship in black lower-class marriage.

The untenable situation between the two is aggravated when Ned 'binds' John to a former overseer, known for his cruelty, to work on his land. Amy is outraged for she views this procedure as another form of putting blacks back into slavery. Her disagreement culminates in a violent scene when Ned surreptitiously approaches Amy from behind and hits her hard with a rawhide whip. Caught by her "tigress onslaught" (22), Ned tries to choke her. John comes, to her aid and knocks him out. Amy's subsequent decision to send him 'over the creek' from where he came, Massa Alf Pearson's plantation, and his departure, close the initial chapter of the novel.

Hurston's masterful' handling of character and situation in a scene that functions as a springboard to the main action, produces a sharp picture of the power relations in the black marriage. In terms of characterization, Ned and Amy foreshadow the more elaborate characters of John and Lucy, and attest to Hurston's unqualified committment to the image of the strong intelligent and resourceful black woman. Ned is the bitter, hard-headed black man, incapable of moving beyond the terms of his early conditioning as a slave and imprisoned in the narrow framework of his experiences. Deprived of the conditions that would allow self-determination, Ned displays a dependency of mind that is extremely negative toward his race and which points to his assimilation of white color and caste prejudices. Amy's criticism hits the point: "'Monkey see, monkey do'" (24). His lack of social awareness makes him a spokesman for the white-trash's hostility toward lighter skin blacks. He just cannot perceive the racial antagonism concealed in this attitude. As if to compensate for his shortcoming, Ned tries to assert himself in the home by being spiteful and aggressive in actions that reproduce the social relations between white oppressor and black oppressed on the level of the marital relationship. The narrator's merciless descriptions help to fix his image as an oppressor. The verbs 'snort,' 'growl,' 'scream,' 'sneer,' 'gloat,' 'grunt,' and 'shuffle' do not serve merely a rhetorical purpose but are integrated into the dramatic texture as they provide access into Ned's character. As an oppressor, he denies the humanity of those around him, and is likewise affected in the process. His dehumanization is epitomized in his 'limping,' a metaphor for his inward desfigurement and alienation from his best self.

As opposed to Ned, Amy shows a positive energy that emanates from a sense of reality not warped by outside definitions. Her daily contact with the life-denying presence of Ned has not affected her awareness

of human purpose and a deep humanity that projects its values outward and forward. Challenging Ned's distorted perceptions she posits a moral and ethical stand, the racial consciousness towards which he should move: "'You always runnin' yo' race down;' 'Niggers gwine faint too. May not come in yo' time and it may not come in mine, but way after while, us people is gwine faint jest lak white folks. You watch and see'" (25).

Amy strives in a world where her human value is not perceived. Even so, she tries to keep intact her wholeness and integrity of self, if not by radical actions at least by asserting her freedom to articulate her thoughts and feelings. Endowed with practical reasoning, she manages to keep the family together during troubling times, in spite of Ned's inadequacy. She puts up with an oppressive relationship, not because she lacks courage and determination to pursue a life of her own, but because her experience of oppression, poverty and social abandonment taught her to link her fate with the black man's. She knows that the historical moment, the emergence of a scattered people from slavery, is not the adequate moment for her to question her role. Forsaking personal fulfillment in a loveless and bitter union, Amy invests emotionally in her children. It is here that Hurston unveils the pathos of black motherhood: to love is to be able to say good-bye and to endure separation. As John leaves, "the welts on her face and body hurt her and the world was heavy" (p. 28).

John Pearson's story, properly speaking, begins as a necessary journey to escape Ned's hatred. At sixteen, he feels an urgent need to be and to assert his identity. On leaving, he experiences a sense of exhilarating freedom that combines with an awakening sexuality. The absence of the father figure unleashes an urge to have his way with girls. Psychologically, this sexual urge, on the threshold of a new life, presents a double aspect. On the one hand, it is a way of fighting off his illegitimacy, a sort of castration, by affirming

his sexual identity. On the other, it is an expression of the internalized cultural practices sanctioned by the community: a male identity is measured by his sexual experiences.

This pursuit of autonomy and freedom through sexuality, that marks John's rupture with the familial environment, is however tempered by his deep-seated emotional ties to his mother. On the unconscious level, this attachment prevents his regarding all women as objects of his desire. Consequently, from the very beginning, Johns shows a dissociation between feelings and sexual gratification. On his way to Pearce's plantation, for example, he is addressed by a group of school girls who make fun of his shabbiness and humble disposition. Though embarrassed at first, he is quick to observe the girls' bodies, the visible signs of their growth into womanhood. But he does not feel the same in relation to the little black-eyed girl. Looking straight into her face, "he felt ashamed. Seemed as if she had caught him doing something nasty" (31).

This first encounter with Lucy Potts, his future wife, anticipates the terms of John's relationship with her. While the other girls are percived as sexual beings, Lucy is seen as an assertive young person who elicits John's admiration and respect. He immediately places her on a pedestal. With her independent ways, her sharp observations and friendly personality, she becomes a goal for which he is willing to strive. As early as in this episode, Lucy's qualities disclose her potentials as a mother-figure towards whom John is drawn. He develops a strong emotional attachment to the girl who is regarded, in the community at large, as a model of virtue and accomplishment. Taking his obscurity and illiteracy as a condition to be overcome, John thrusts himself onto the road of achievement in a self-conscious effort to become 'someone' and thus prove himself worthy of Lucy's love.

Their period of courtship parallels John's growth through activities that gradually win him a space in

the mind of the folks. Manipulated at first by Alf Pearson's greed for cheap black labor, John soon demonstrates his capacity for serious work by undertaking the responsibility for his education and by performing important tasks at the plantation. In addition to that, his relationship with the black community is strengthened as he imposes himself as a sort of folk hero during the traditional celebrations of harvest time. The superiority of his muscle power combined with a handsome figure, his ability both to tell folktales and act them out as well as his popularity among women, fulfill the group's role expectation and bolster his ego with a new sense of manhood pride.

John's social prestige does not bring about the integration of his personality. The distance between feelings and sexual drives is accentuated in his relationship with the women from the quarters. Urged by his instincts, he seeks physical gratification with the girls in the cotton fields, in actions that undermine affective ties and contribute to the abuse and degradation of the black woman. At the same time, he channels his best impulses into Lucy, who he looks for in the church and worships as one "among angels in Heaven" (125).

Face to face with Lucy's flawlessness, John feels vulnerable, a vulnerability that he wrongly senses as intellectual inferiority rather than as personal deficiency. The double standard of his behavior helps to perpetuate this lack of perception about himself and it enhances Lucy's distance from him. The other girls just called for action, but with Lucy "he needed words he didn't have" (63). In his fantasies of affirmation, he imagines himself "making imaginary speeches to her. Speeches full of big words that would make her gasp and do him 'reverence'" (65). John's hopeless struggles to erase, once for all, his feelings of belonging 'over the creek" in order to project a strong self-image in Lucy's eyes, are well ilustrated in the episode of the snake in the branch (69). The episode adds

an important insight into the development of their relationship. Unable to get the edge in mental terms, John exults with the opportunity to display his male strength by boldly killing the snake that has been frightening Lucy for some time. The symbolic significance of the scene could hardly be more clearly spelled out. The snake that lives in a hole down in the bank is a phallic image that projects outward the energy of masculine sexuality. By removing the source of Lucy's natural fear [she is fourteen, and awakening to the meaning of sexuality], John acts consistently with his perception of her. For him, Lucy represents an idealization of what is good and holy, not a fully-fleshed woman. Consequently, his love for her is based upon an abstraction, having nothing to do with the world of human drives. Ironically, as John commits Lucy to her special sanctuary, a place where her humanity is to be denied, the text bears witness to Lucy's discovery: "The following Saturday when she stripped to bathe in the wooden wash tub, she noted that tiny horizontal ridges had lifted her bust a step away from childhood" (116).

The marriage scene conveys the quaint truth of Lucy's plight as a woman. Breaking the ties that held her dependent upon her family in a "world that had been like a shell about her" (130), she enters into a relationship that perpetuates her powerless status. The surrogate power of the husband is encoded in John's words: "'...Ahm gointer be uh father and uh mother tuh you. You jes' look tuh me, girl chile. Jes' you put yo' 'pendence in me'" (131). The central portion of the novel dwells on their relationship as husband and wife. It discloses a story of neglect, abuse and irresponsibility, of numberless pregnancies and betrayals. Lucy is gradually stripped of her aspirations for happiness as her affection is mocked over and over again by John's unfaithfulness. Always returning to her and resolving to have another chance, John reduces the scope of Lucy's life to the functions of breeding and rearing children. Ruthless in his domineering self-assertion and

clinging to his male prerogatives, among which are the freedom to come and go at will, John does not make a lasting personal commitment to her and the children's welfare nor does he fulfill his role responsibilities. Unshaken by her disillusionment, Lucy becomes, by the force of the circumstances, the cohesive force in the family.

The account of their early married years is given in a compact and tight narrative that intimates the pressures and constriction of forces aligned against her. In a matter of four pages, she gives birth to three children. Far from feeling any fulfillment, Lucy feels helpless at realizing the inequality of their love. At certain moments, she withdraws and seeks comfort in praying, pouring out her feelings and trying to discover through her weariness, a reason to hope for better days. Generally, however, she does not shrink from reality. True to her magnanimous character and honest about her feelings, she speaks her mind when John indirectly confesses his liason with Big 'Oman: "'... if you loves her de bes', John, you gimme our chillum and you go on where yo' love lie'" (144). John's response is a loud protestation of love. He attributes his roguery to "'de brute-beast in me'" (144), in a clear example of the compartmentalization of the emotional and the physical. His speech betrays the fact that his affection is directed, not to the woman, but to the mother of his children: "'Here you done had three younguns fuh me and fixin 'have uh' nother.' Try me Lucy'" (144).

However sincere he night have been at the time, his pledge erodes under the pressure of his inconstancy and he seeks to gratify his male libido with a newly-arrived woman in town. On describing John's attitudes, the narrative voice, though seemingly neutral, instills in the reader a sense of outrage by underlining his neglect of Lucy as she is approaching delivery: "John was away from both home and church almost continually in the next month" (146). Lucy's utter abandonment at a time when she is most debilitated in her capacity to

act on her own, is fully dramatized in one of the most poignant moments of the novel. While the scene stresses Lucy's attempt to articulate her despair, it also delineates the subtle contours of her oppression. On submitting to her biological destiny, she is placed in a position where the conditions arising from her natural capacity to reproduce life magnify her vulnerability, and make her an easy target for exploitation. Brother and husband, in their base action and shameless indifference, respectively, join in to assert the power hierarchy between the sexes. During John's absence, Lucy's brother comes to collect a three-dollar debt that she is unable to pay. Taking advantage of her physical weakness, he intrudes into the house and, deaf to her pleadings, seizes the marriage bed she prized. The failure of male support and companionship is metaphorically conveyed in Lucy's dispossession, a fact that affects the circumstances of her daughter's birth, as if to suggest that mother's and daughter's fates are intimately linked by the fact of being females: "Before midnight Lucy in awful agony upon her pallet on the floor had given birth to her first daughter" (150). The magnitude of Lucy's sufferings reaches beyond what her simple words can convey: "'Ah got somethin' in mah heart ain't got no name. Ah layin' here right now tryin' tuh find some words for feelin's. Look lak mah right heart ain't beatin' no mor'" (151).

John's confrontation with Lucy on the following day confirms her dispossession as a person. Without a word to justify himself or to say he is sorry, he adopts a flattering tone toward's Lucy's motherhood. Her valor is only acknowledged in terms of the big babies she brings into the world. John's interest centers on the new-born baby: "'Dat's jus' whut Ah wanted - uh girl so us could have it fuh uh doll-baby'" (153). The dehumanized appreciation of his daughter, that enforces sex-role definitions, perpetuates John's one-dimensional view of Lucy and consolidates his male supremacy in the home. It is his entrenched manhood pride, and not a

regard for Lucy, that, later, drives him to take revenge on Bud Potts. On justifying his action, he posits a defensive attitude that stems from imbibed cultural notions, notions that are based on the assumption of woman's traditional powerlessness and a man's rightful claim to protect her by asserting his ownership and thus, fulfilling his manly role: "'You got uh man[14] tuh fend fuh yon.' 'Youse mah wife and all Ah want you tuh do is gimme uh chance tuh show mah spunk'" (156).

His words actually convey the precarious status of his identity. John is entrapped in a definition that, equating manhood with 'spunk,' promotes the atrophy of sensitivity and the consequent inversion of human values. His stress on 'showing his spunk' as if this act would redeem his self-image or would address Lucy's needs, exemplify the narrow scope of his humanity. Ironically, the narrative, through the manipulation of a narrator who sees more deeply than the character, exposes the self-deceiving nature of John's rhetoric by showing situations that deflate his assertions. Following his arraignment in court on charges of physical violence against Lucy's brother, and his release due to Lucy's interventions, John is encouraged by Alf Pearson, who happens to be the judge, to leave Notasulga and seek a new life elsewhere. Reaching Florida, he works for a while in a railroad camp where he hears of a colored town called Eatonville. Fascinated, at once, with the place where "'uh man kin be sumpin 'heah' thout folks tramplin' all over yuh'" (174), he decides to send for Lucy and the children. Yet, it takes almost a year to move from decision to action. The delay points to the contradictions that plague John's character: his alleged love for Lucy and his careless actions; his desire to play the traditional patriarchal role and the relinquishment of responsibility for and connection to the family. His lack of self-knowledge, perceptively grasped by judge Pearson (163), cripples his capacity to detect his incongruities. His 'pseudo' inner conflicts are not attempts to resolve the impasse of his person-

ality but arise from sudden outbursts of feelings that he would rather ignore. Feelings such as shame, guilt and weakness that hint at a self that does not fit in with the image he has of himself. It is remorse that, at last, compels him to send the money for Lucy's trip. His first address, upon her arrival, is shocking for its callous self-centered nature: "'Glad tuh see me, Lucy?'" (175) He shows not one sign of interest in or concern with her or with how she had managed with four little children during his absence.

Lucy's reactions spring from a woman determined to keep the family together. She takes stock of her new life--and the question of place obviously has a lot to do with her spirits. Overtaken by the joy that its physical texture instills in her, "she seemed to herself to be coming home" (176). She shares John's racial viewpoint about the sense of freedom and of self-determination that Blacks can experience in an environment without "'folks actin' top-superior'" (177). Her resourceful and creative intelligence is decisive for the rising material prosperity of the family. John's transformation into a successful property owner would not have been possible without Lucy's hard-work and encouragement, which earn her the unanimous admiration of the storefront men, and John's resentment. The feeling that one's image is dependent on a woman's qualities hits hard at his pride, but harder still is the fear that he might lose her to another man.

The bedroom scene illustrates the politics of male dominance by which a man reasserts ownership and control over a woman's body and her person. John's actions are geared to demand an unconditional recognition of his authority over Lucy's destiny. He does not hesitate to use a Winchester rifle, [he makes sure it is loaded], a symbol of male power, in order to wrench from her a pledge of fidelity. On the one hand, what stands out in the scene is John's capacity for meanness. On the other, what raises questions and, therefore, demands a closer look, is Lucy's response to the situation. When

first asked whether she regrets her marriage, her answer comes quick and straightforward: "'Whut make you ast me dat? If you tired uh me, jus' leave me. Another man over de fence waitin' fuh yo' job'" (179). Lucy shows no sign of being intimidated by mentioning a possibility that must have crossed her mind. But it is precisely her words that incite John's anger. He is susceptible to their power for he himself had once acknowledged that women might "'ruin a man wid dey tongue'" (157). Thus, to forbid Lucy to use words as she pleases is the constricting measure that precedes the prohibition of movement, of choice: "'... if you ever start out de door tuh leave me, you'll never make it tuh de gate. Ah means tuh blow yo' heart out and hang fuh it'" (180). At this point, Lucy's reply is a mere unfinished sentence that conceals an accusation "'You done _____?'". In order to defuse her last resistance, John resorts to a well-known strategy; he elevates Lucy by denigrating the "'trashy women Ah lusts after once in a while'" (180). Coerced into passivity and beguiled by words, Lucy surrenders herself through a renewed affirmation of her love. It becomes quite clear that their exchange suggests the pernicious effect that psychological blackmail has upon Lucy's response to the reality of their relationship. Her surrender is a consent to playing a role that alienates her from the subject she is to herself in favor of the object she is to John. Unable to sustain her initial feelings because of his pressure, she ends up falling into the romantic trap where she bows to John's authority with a pledge of love. Yet, such a pledge cannot ever be an expression of spiritual kinship but, rather, the warped articulation of a honest self facing male oppression. It is worth noting here, the importance of the scene to further Hurston's point of view. Against the background of upward mobility, in an atmosphere of relative freedom that marks the blacks' entrance into the bourgeois world of acquisiton and competition, the unequal power context of male and female relationships is consolidated

in the definition of marriage as a relation of dependency and power, where love is measured by the degree to which a woman shows an unquestioning submission to male rule.

Notwithstanding the dehumanized context of their relationship, Lucy's affection for John connot be altogether regarded as a product of self-deception. She does care for him and seeks to transform him into a sensible and responsible human being. She encourages him to preach, perhaps in the hope that he distance himself from his life of degradation and promiscuity. Yet, his rise as a born orator endowed with the poetic powers that "'sets de church on fire'" (182), accentuates even more the polar opposites of his personality by making visible the split between saying and doing, between the emotional and the psysical, extending, thus, the characteristics of his actions in private life into the sphere of his public world. His inflamed speeches, though permeated by a rich and sensual imagery that virtually transposes conceptual truths into concrete images, are confined to the abstract plateau of religious ideals in that they are completely ineffective to alter the quality of a deviant life that drags him, more and more, into the mire of infidelity.

Without explicitly sanctioning John's behavior, the black community absorbs the coexistence of the preacher and the adulterer as a natural flow of his exuberant maleness. It is quite appropriate to mention that the historical role of the black churches has been linked to the integration of blacks into the white patriarchal norm. Run by men and constituting the domain of male public power, they "have typically functioned to validate black male identity"[15]. This sexual bias is reflected in the community's condoning attitude towards John's moral conduct. From the point of view of patriarchy, his extramarital affairs, beyond a search for pleasure, are means of self-assertion that befit the male image validated by the group, and which is constructed upon the devaluation of woman, on both

psychological and cultural levels. This image becomes actually consecrated in John's role as a black preacher. It matters little whether his personal life measures up to the lips which speak. As the patriarchal leader of the community, he becomes a surrogate father whose ability to materialize the word [an analogy to Good himself who transformed the word into flesh], enthralls the community in awe and admiration. This is a measure of his power and a source of his pride: "He was above the earth. He preached and prayed. He sang and sinned, but men saw his cloak and felt it" (182).

Because Lucy's knowledge of John reaches beyond a skin-deep perception of his shortcomings, she cannot see him with the same eyes of his congregation, nor does she remain silent facing his soaring pride. When he is elected Moderator and boasts of his new status by asking her "'Ah uh big nigger now. Ain't Ah Lucy,?" her sharp ironic reply detracts from the community's point of view: "'You sho is. All you got tuh do now is tuh ack lak one'" (189). Lucy's utterance implies a value judgment that is grounded on the understanding of a necessary relationship between word and action, theory and practice. It does puncture John's conceit. His wounded self-esteem leads him to bring into the open, the resentment of years: "'... You always tryin' tuh tell me whut tuh do. Ah wouldn't be where Ah is, if Ah didn't know no more'n you think Ah do ...'" (189). Considering what had been disclosed by the narrator just a few lines before, "John had to be pushed and shoved ...," the reader is bound to detect the misleading note in his words. The scene confirms John's psychological need to proclaim his individual capacity and independence in order to fulfill the image of the strong, virile and self-made man. The fact that he is captive of the trappings of an image is objectively rendered in the text. After the argument with Lucy, he is described as striding off in big style (189), insensitive to the world around him. For Lucy, who is left behind on the porch, "the blue sky looked all wrinkled" through

her tears.

Lucy's conformity, facing the barrenness of their marriage, takes on the traditional feminine gesture of impotence: she weeps and then, she does not care. Mothering seven children and bearing the unilateral responsibility for their wellfare, she naturally retreats into her nurturing role as a form of exercising her humanity and of insulating herself both from the pain of solitude and from those moments of "coldness" that grow numerous and seem to numb her will. When their oldest daughter Isis is down with typhoid and nearly dies, Lucy's capacity to rely upon her inner strength and courage in a trial verges on the sublime, contrasting radically with John's recklessness that drives him away from his daughter's bedside to Tampa, and to Hattie Tyson's arms (190). No matter how the narrator describes his suffering as genuine, the overall effect of his reaction towards the domestic situation bestirs a negative note that, at once, evokes his similar absence from home on the occasion of the girl's birth. Isis' illness lays bare what has been latent throughout the novel, in terms of parental role. While John's lack of stamina disguises the tangential quality of his response towards parenthood [a baby girl is no more than an asset that a proud preacher displays to the congregation (188)], Lucy's fortitude and restraint attest to her emotional and moral commitment towards the family.

The high dramatic moment of the narrative is rendered in chapter XVI, which deals with Lucy's illness and her untimely death. Since this chapter imediately follows the one where Hattie Tysen visits Dangie Dewoe, a hoodoo doctor, and engages her to conjure John, the reader is led to believe that Lucy's fate is a direct cause of hoodoo practices. But, as Robert Hemenway points out, the relationship has "no basis in fact."[15] The movement of the narrative warrants the fact that the deterioration of Lucy's health is the consequence of a life of toil, abuse and disappointments. In these

terms, Hurston does not intend to portray Lucy as a super woman, with a limitless capacity for endurance, but to convey essentially, her humanness. There are limits beyond which a woman cannot stand being ignored as a person and relegated to the status of an object. These limits, for Lucy, burst forth in a visceral protest against alienation: "'Know too Ahm sick and you been home fuh de las' longest and ain't been near me tuh offer me uh cup uh cool water uh ast me how Ah feel'" (203). Annoyed by Lucy's protest because it reverberates with a direct repproach to his conduct, John charges her with "'always doggin' me 'about sumpin'". The bitter exchange that follows represents a dissection, the final agonizing moment of a twenty-two year old marriage. The sentimental guise of John's relationship with Lucy is lifted to be replaced by the bluntest statement of male chauvinism. Lucy's sense of outrage and the emergent consciousness of her oppression encode a biting indictment of John's pride.[17] She stands up to his charges by referring to his love affair with Hattie that will not permit him to "'stay home and look after yo' wife and chillun'" (204). Exasperated by her words because they do tell the truth, John commands Lucy to shut up: "'Ahm sick an' tired uh yo' yowin' and jawin.' '... Ah do ez Ah please ... Aways sick and complainin'. Uh man can't utilize hisself'" (204). Instead of silence, a measure of conformity, Lucy speaks of her being reduced to "'uh stumblin' stone tuh yuh,'" and she does not waiver when, in spite of his threats, she demands: "'Me and mah chillun got some rights. Big talk ain't changin' whut you doin'. You can't clean yo' self wid yo' tongue lak uh cat.'" John's reply is a resounding slap on her face. Backing away, he listens to Lucy's prophetic adage: "'De hidden wedge will come tuh light some day, John. Mark mah words'" (205). In order to preserve her self-respect after this moment, Lucy uses the only strategy left for her: she acts alien. She turns her face to the wall and refuses to eat. Her relinquishment of a life of suffering and indignities finds symbolic rein-

forcement in the spider',[18] a portent of death, whose imperceptible movements on the ceiling hold Lucy in a spellbound attention. She just remarks: "'he done took up uh stand'" (206).

When one views Lucy's attitudes against the backdrop of impending death, one is struck by the coherence and depth of her vision, her capacity to transform her enslavement into a will of independence through a language that, instead of reflecting assimilated images, creates her own way of seeing her experiences. The two dialogues she carries on, first with her daughter Isis,[19] and then with Sister Clarke, become a sort of meditation on a woman's identity, her role and her place, meditations that stem from a living experience of oppression and that lay the groundwork for woman's consciousness of self and role. As a black lower-class woman, Lucy always emphasized personal achievement as the only way to overcome the limitations that race and class placed on the individual's pursuit of personhood. Being unable to fulfill her potentialities herself, because of her entrapment in the female role, she urged John to "jump at the sun" (156), only to be desillusioned, time after time, with his unrelenting pursuit of vice and promiscuity. Now, on her deatbed, she bequeaths to her daughter the hard-won wisdom of her life's experiences in a speech that actualizes the female kinship that permeates the narrative from the moment of Isis' birth. On advising the latter to get "'all de education you can'" because "'dat's de onliest way you kin keep out from under people's feet'" (206), she reminds us of another woman, Amy Crittenden, who also envisioned freedom in terms of human growth fostered by education. The importance of Lucy's advice cannot be assessed only in relation to a racial point of view but also in relation to a sexual one. Her emphasis on education for a woman implies a questioning of the ideology of woman's place and an assertion that love, children and toil are not a total way of life. On speculating on her daughter's future, she does not bring up the issue of marriage. Instead, she views her daughter as a self-reliant, in-

dependent woman who "'kin 'fend fuh herself'" (207). She tries to instill in Isis a positive valuation of self that crystallizes her defiance of the assumption of female inferiority and subjection: "'Dont't you love nobody better'n you do yo' self.'"

Lucy's final words to Sister Clarke is the most memorable passage of the novel. It is a confession, in the most authentic country diction, of her confinement in the domestic world. Her rhetoric ultimately signals her liberation:

> 'Ah done been in sorrow's kitchen and Ah done licked on all de pots. Ah done died in grief and been buried in de bitter waters, and Ah done rose agin from de dead lak Lazarus. Nothin' kin touch mah soul no mo'. It wuz hard tuh loose de string-holt on mah li'l' chillun' ... 'but Ah reckon Ah done dat too' (209).

Rather than a loss of self, her death comes as the realization of her freedom, the rescuing of an identity that had been drowned in needs and in being needed. Hurston uses nature imagery to convey the idea of death as positive and attractive. Lucy's agony is described against the background of a bright afternoon, "and a clear light streamed into the room from the bare windows" (211). It is ironic, however, that her actual death is caused by the interference of community members. Eager to perform the practices sanctioned by collective behavior and ritual for such occasions, they are heedless to Isis' plea that her mother's last wishes be fulfilled and, so, precipitate Lucy's denouement by drawing the pillow from beneath her head. This action dramatizes Lucy's condition. Even in her dying moments she cannot defy the conventional social mores. Her death-bed wishes are ignored not only because of their subversive quality vis-à-vis the patterns of collective life, but also because of the powerlessness inherent to a woman's voice [mother and daughter], in the context of a male-dominated society. Historically, the brave and vital Lucy, a woman of the future, is still linked

to the shackles of the past. A narrative device significantly closes the chapter, as an indicator of Hurston's discomfort with the manner of Lucy's death. In the night of her burial, a strong wind, that is curiously confined within the limits of the property, arises and sweeps both house and garden, leaving John shaking and afraid beneath his bed-covers.

After Lucy's death the narrative slackens and loses somewhat its gripping energy. The focus centers on John who, relieved of his guilt, is "just a free man having his will of women" (221). He marries his former mistress, Hattie Tyson, but haunted by Lucy's staring eyes, he comes to resent her, often beats her savagely, and exploits her labor. When be finds out Hattie has conjured him with roots and potions, he files suit for divorce. At Hattie's goading, church officials begin to plot his downfall but they are forced to acknowledge that the majority does not care what he does and, in fact, "' stands in wid it'" (230).

The courtroom scene, where the divorce trial takes place, marks the beginning of John's descent. Whereas the moral question regarding his conduct seems to have faded completely into the background, the scene focuses on the hypocrisy of the folk who, unexpectedly, are even eager to lake a stand against their preacher. John's inability to grasp the fickleness of the crowd unfolds one more aspect of his own lack of discernment. It is true that the narrative, at this point, tends to blur his inequities by concentrating on his victimization, but, overall, it consistently offers the evidence of John's own words as a proof that he himself is his worst enemy. Witness his exchange with Hambo, a long time friend:

> '... Don't it look funny, dat all mah ole pleasures done got tuh be new sins? Maybe iss 'cause Ahm gittin' ole. Havin' women didn't useter be no sin. Jus' got sinful since Ah got ole' (263).

When, weary of the pressures of those who want to bring him down, John retires from the pulpit, his justification does not hint at any psychological tension at his inadequacy nor does any moral assumption loom as a factor in his decision. Instead, an unabashed expression of male chauvinisn is concealed within words that seem to be concerned "with the communal celebration:"[20]

> '... Ah don't b'lieve Ahm fitted tuh preach de gospel unless de world is wrong. Yuh see dey's ready fuh uh preacher tuh be uh man uhmongst men, but dey aind't ready yet fuh 'im tuh be uh man uhmongst women' (282).

John Pearson is given one more chance to redeem himself. He moves to Plant City, marries Sally Lovelace, a good amiable woman modelled after Lucy, and begins a new life as a carpenter. Yet, his sexual compulsion betrays him for the last time. Going to Oviedo to visit Hambo, John surrenders to Ora Patton's adolescent charms. As an offspring of a male-centered world, she is quick to perceive the relationship between sex, money and power and so, she exploits John's lusty bent in order to get money otherwise unobtainable. In her pitiful womanhood, she ends up being depicted as an object of male manipulation that can be used and discarded at his will (308). Ironically, she calls him 'papa' and 'sweet daddy,' a parodic allusion [not without an incestuous connotation], to his role as pastor.

It is John's self-blindness, before and after his final degradation with Ora, that raises a most pertinent question with respect to Beatrice Royster's claim that he dies a "penitent death."[21] Unlike the tragic hero who, however late, realizes that perception must precede action and thus bows to the consequences of his errors, John Pearson, in the moments that precede his death, is confused and contradictory. If, momentarily, he pictures himself as a "False pretender," soon he resumes his old self by mentally anticipating his encounter with Sally: "Faith and no questions asked." The fact that

he perceives Sally as a reincarnation of Lucy is one indication that the old pattern is about to be reenacted and that he is about to manipulate Sally's good faith. The text substantiates obliquely, such a reading: "He drove on but half-seeing the railroad from looking inward" (309).

It is relevant, at this point, to consider the fact that John is killed by an onconing train. The train, as an image that recurs throughout the novel, functions as a centripretal axis for the narrative's thematic strains. It epitomizes the destructive forces in the grips of which John is prevented from achieving human wholeness. When he saw the train for the first time, he stood in awe and fear before that terrible "panting monster" whose great eye "glared and threatened" and whose sides "seemed to expand and contract like a fiery-lunged monster" (35). This vision coincided not only with the moment of his venturing over the creek into the outside world but, most significant of all, with the sense of anticipation that the release of his emergent sexuality afforded to him. Later on, when the train is mentioned again, John's reactions to it are qualitatively different. It has become a quite familiar presence that holds him fascinated by its constancy (p.76), "the greatest accumulation of power" (169). Hurston's treatment of the train image, described first as if it were a living entity, evokes a relationship between power and sexuality, which endows the image with a parabolic quality in relation to John's character.

In the tragic denouement of the novel, the image of the train unifies private and social realities attesting thus to Hurston's cogency of perception and the caliber of her craft. In a strict sense, John is victimized by his own uncontrollable sexuality, of which the train is an appropriate symbol, both in form and content-- the human has lost its humanness to perform like a machine. Subordinated to this primary meaning and within the larger social context of the South of 1920's, the train becomes the symbol of a new economic order, the mark of a New South. Within this order,

John believes himself to be free to exercise his manhood, but he is still circumscribed by being black, and, more than ever, enslaved to his sexuality. The novel makes it clear that this latter from of enslavement is not only a question of personality, but that it flourishes under a patriarchal system that endorses a double standard of sexual morality and fosters the divison of women into two groups: the madonna and the whore.

// Even though it is possible to identify behind the manifestations of John's character an underlying structure of oppression, the narrative's stance is not inclined to make allovances for him. His personal failure to know himself, his overarching pride and acquiescence to roguery practically destroy his credibility as a character endowed with any humanistic quality. His greatness as a cultural figure, the black preacher that merges within himself the pre-christian African heritage with the religiosity of Afro-American worship, is overshadowed by his lack of human worth as a person, and by his distance from any set of ethics. The deux ex-machina ending points to the author's moral judgment, despite the absence of judgment on the part of the community.

Hurston's engagement with and empathic treatment of her female characters in Jonah's Gourd Vine establish a literary bond between the author, as female, and her characters, a bond that, actually, manipulates the reader's sympathy and hinders his/her identification with the oppressor [male character], even though the latter is conventionally clothed as a hero.[22] The text, thus, activates and unfolds in its texture an ideology of gender that, incorporating a female historical consciousness vis-à-vis the lives of black men and women in America, distances from the values of patriarchy that have buttressed the development of the black male identity. Such a distance is conveyed by the "subversive" qualities bestowed upon the women, who are positive, tough, resilient and full of humanity,// particularly Lucy Pearson, for whom liberation, if not yet a reality to be fully lived, is a vision worth struggling toward. Ultimately,

it rests with them, the possibility of evolving the self-knowledge necessary to break the actual disposition of male-female power relationships so that one may hope for change in the status quo of sex relations.[22]

Their Eyes were Watching God,[23] Hurston's most acclaimed novel which Robert Bone emphatically ranks second to Richard Wright's *Native Son* as the best novel of the period,[24] explores the emotional context of a woman's life as she learns to resist the alienation fostered by the politics of male dominance, recaptures her own will and finally, after two marriages, enters into a relationship that breaks out of the prison of traditional sex roles and allows for the integration of her sexuality with her potentialities as a human being. It is a novel of apprenticeship that traces the emerging consciousness of Janie Crawford, a black woman in the rural backwoods of the post-bellum South, whose dream of womanhood clashes with the reality of the patriarchal marriage, in which the authoritarian male rule reduces her into an unfeeling piece of property: her sexuality repressed, her labor capacity exploited and her humanity constrained. Holding on to her vision of the ideal relationship with a man, a vision that is tempered by experience ~~and expanded~~ according to Janie's developing awareness of herself, she rejects the values implicit in the notion of marriage as a prop to woman's security, protection and respectability. She deliberately situates herself in that marginal area that defies conventional sexual and social relations but where she can pursue her right to self-expression in spite of the pressures of the folk community that espouses traditional assumptions of what a woman ought to be, think and do. At last, Janie Crawford finds the love and fulfillment that have eluded her for almost twenty years in the short-lived relationship with Vergible Woods [Tea Cake], an immigrant laborer who helps her to discover that sexual and emotional gratification is only possible through a partnership between equals who "'partake wid everything'" (186). It is a relationship that, for an idyllic period, abolishes the

opposition between masculine and feminine, home and work, private and collective.

In the characterization of Janie Crawford, Hurston engrafted the qualities that make of Delia Sykes, Amy Crittenden and Lucy Pearson early sketchy versions of her present character. Beneath the image of these abused women lies the psychological and physical resistance, the will to throw off servility and the potentiality for action, that inspire Janie's quest for happiness. Her determination means a historical break with the heritage of black women's vulnerability to male - black or white - concupiscence and exploitation. Two generations removed from slavery, Janie faces the possibility of making choices while she matures and develops the critical ability that allows her to discern between the conventional roles she is asked to play and the woman she wants to be. Unlike her grandmother, victimized by her master, and her own mother Leafy, raped by a schoolteacher during the Reconstruction, whose lives were determined by circumstances that did not take account of their feelings and rendered choice impossible, Janie struggles to keep the integrity of self and the priority of her feelings against the system that presses her to acquiesce and be a tool of man's needs.

She self-consciounsly reacts against the legacy of both a collective and a personal history of degradation. But it must be also acknowledged that she is strenghened by the awareness of what that history means in relation to her own expectations as a woman. She is not a Delia, Amy or Lucy who seem to be satisfied with scraps. She is, definitely, more ambitions and not as humble as they are. Even though she is not exempt from self-deception, she has the energy and disposition to undertake a journey, often not a pleasant one, in which she seeks to validate her womanhood in terms compatible with her needs and personality, a validation that begins when she chooses who and how she wants to love.

Whether intended or not, it is significant that Janie is childless, a fact that gives her some advantage

over her predecessors, because it places her outside the social hierarchy within which lies the most important aspect that perpetuates patriarchy: the reproduction of life in the nuclear family. In addition to that, this freedom from the myth of woman's 'natural' role presents a subversive quality in that it removes one of the reasons by which male supremacy is established in the home: woman's helplessness and dependency during pregnancy. Janie thus possesses all along the physical mobility necessary to make of her dream an actuality.//

The opening descriptive paragraphs set the mood for the unfolding of Janie's story. They present a lyrical rendering of the distinction between men and women as to their perceptions of reality. While man shows a resigned attitude facing the shattering of his dreams by forces outside his control that point to the futility and transience of life, woman has the capacity, through her imagination, to transcend the limitations of a contingent world. For women "the dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly" (p.9). The way that Hurston poses this differentness conveys a note of defiance in relation to the assumption of an existential cul-de-sac in that she refers to the strengh of women's subjective will to construct their world according to their own vision of meaning and purpose. For women, dream is neither a romantic flight from reality nor an unattainable goal but the vision that motivates their acting and doing, and their involvement with the world.

This introduction, which might well be regarded as a statement of Hurston's self-defense as a writer with respect to her adopted point of view, functions as a preamble that illuminates the character of the novel: its immersion in female reality.//The action commences with Janie's return to the all-black town of Eatonville. She has just buried Tea Cake, whom she had shot in self-defense, after he had tried to kill her during one of his attacks caused by rabies. Janie returns to the place where, in the past, she had lived as the distinguished wife of the mayor. She walks unabashed to her gate, though

she is aware of being the target of hostile gossip on the part of the folks who, gathered in their front porches, "passed nations through their mouths" (10). For them, her soiled overalls and her hair "'swingin' down her back lak some young gal'" are inadequate and even offensive because they do not meet the standards of propriety and decorum required by her class, age and sex. Malice informs the folk's collective voice that speculates: Tea Cake, with whom Janie eloped following the death of the mayor, has probably robbed her of her money and left her for some younger girl. Only Phcoby, Janie's longtime friend, welcomes her return with warmth. Her eagerness "to feel and do through Janie" (18) coincides with the latter's longing for self-revelation and, in fact, helps her to tell her story (23). Janie begins the account of what happened in her two-year absence, of her dream and her wanderings as "'a delegate to de big' ssociation of life'" (18).

Whereas the main portion of the novel comprises a flashback to the central narrative, the two ends center on the exchange between the two women who are drawn together by a sisterly kinship. On the level of the structure of the narrative, this kinship is paralleled in the proximity between narrator and character, since in many instances, there are shifts from third to first-person point of view and vice-versa that tend to obscure differentiation. The fact that Janie tells her story is very important, because the telling to another can be regarded as a fictional strategy, the double function of which is vital to an understanding of the ideological components that govern the novel's point of view.

First, the 'telling' functions as a way of coming to terms with the meaning and scope of one's experiences. To the extent that the act of 'telling' implies a distance from experience to dwell on the discourse that names its terms, it is a dynamic process of ordering and giving coherence, through language, to an amorphus reality primarily experienced through the filter of random perceptions and feelings. Janie's access to language as

the medium with which she can name and, concomitantly, order the past, asserts her individuality and integrates her into the dialectical movement between experience and knowledge that is operative in the process of growth and change that buttresses the development of the narrative.

Second, it serves to reintegrate Janie, via Pheoby, into the context of the folk community, to her racial roots, in spite of the tension that permeates the initial scene. Pheoby becomes a sort of mediator between the social and the individual, through whom Janie feels some sense of being part of a larger whole. She returns home, and this decision strengthens the evidence that she does not want to forfeit her place as a member of the racial community. In short, the telling of her story is a social activity that reclaims the communal nature of the self and invites others to participate and validate its efforts. It becomes a measure of Janie's awareness of and response to the social rituals that regulate the communal life, rituals that perpetuate, through verbal behavior,[25] the black cultural traditions that humanize the black identity.] This ritual is described in the first page of the novel:

> The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things (9-10).

Janie's account shows she has imbibed this communal narrative ritual of people sitting on porches and passing around "the pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see" (81). Yet, her cultural assimilation has a certain obliqueness. Janie sits not on the front but on the back porch, as if Hurston wanted to suggest that a woman's story with herself as subject and object,

cannot yet be considered a fit subject according to traditional porch activities. For the time being, it has to be confined to a private space and confided to a close friend. It is within this context that Hurston establishes the area of friction between black and female identities, without however disconnecting the two. Part of Janie's struggle is precisely to do away with man-made conventions and discriminatory practices that create a chasm between blackness and female identity, between collective and private realities. On the whole, Their Eyes Were Watching God represents an attempt to resolve the impasse between the social and the individual spheres by stressing kinship, solidarity and support. These elements may engender a new way of seeing, a new way of relating that can alter the social relationship between the sexes, and, ultimately, the social relations within the group. Pheoby's response after Janie's account is over, addresses woman's dissatisfaction with the status quo, but also embodies what is central in Hurston's point of view: knowledge and self-consciousness are the basis for change:

> 'Lawd!' Pheoby breathed out heavily, 'Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid mahself no mo'. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin' wid him after this. Nobody better not criticize yuh in mah hearin' (284).

From the start, Janie's narrative plunges the reader into the unsanctioned realm of female sexuality. The natural imagery of flower calyxes, bee, pollinated air become metaphors that represent the awakening of female libido. Their romantic touch evades censorship while suggesting an image of woman as a sexual, desiring subject. As Janie recollects, her conscious life began at sixteen with a sexual awakening elicited by a sensory experience that stirred some vague yet incomprehensible yearnings buried in her flesh. Stretched on her back beneath a blossoming pear tree, she identifies herself with it and, in the process, tries to understand the metamorphosis

of springtime that changes its barren stems into leaf buds and then "to snowy virginity of bloom: What? How? Why" (23). The answer is given when she sees a bee sinking into the sanctum of a bloom:

> The thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation (24).

Her discovery of nature's moment of organic unity urges a sexual response: "Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid" (24). This involuntary orgasm that marks, above all, Janie's first encounter with her anatomy, brings forth desire "to be a pear tree any tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world!" (25) Janie's search for the bee man, for her blossom throughout the novel, is couched in this recurrent imagery of harmony and wholeness. Yet, a distinction must be made between image and vision, that is, between what the pear tree conveys as a metaphor of sexuality and Janie's early adolescent perceptions and dreams of love. Rather than just an equation of womanhood with sex and marriage with love, the core of Janie's vision, the union of peartree blossom and bee, stands for a total response, sexual, physical and emotional between individualities in a reciprocal act of giving and taking that even transcends the boundaries of the individual to partake of the larger context of interaction between people. This is what wholeness in human terms means. And it is this meaning that Janie has to grasp once sex and marriage do not meet her romantic expectations. In this sense, her development and self-awareness can be measured in terms by which her accrued experiences expand her dream of womanhood. In other words, she must untangle sexuality and fulfillment from the narrow romantic perception of marriage that encourages the sex-role stereotyping of woman as the passive, receptive and submissive partner.

Janie's initiation into the painful process of growth and self-discovery is prematurely brought about by her well-intentioned grandmother, whose wish to marry her safely and well leads her to pawn Janie to Logan Killicks, a black landowning farmer many years her senior whom the former describes as "'some ole skullhead in de grave yard'" (28). Having herself experienced sexual exploitation and having seen her daughter destroyed by rape, Nannie is fearful that Janie might be misused and so conceives of a respectable marriage as a shield of moral and economic protection by means of which the black woman can prevent becoming a "'spit cup'" for men. The bitterness of her tone shows that her scars cut deep, which makes her insight into the oppression of black women the more accurate assessment of racism as the force impinging on black relationships:

> 'Honey, de white man is the ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see' (29).

Nanny's argument about marriage for protection is sound, for it manifests a desire to transcend the historical circularity established by slavery. Nevertheless, its socio-economic assumptions reflect her compromise with the oppressor's values, the effect of which is a dehumanized view of black life. On urging Janie to "'pick from a higher bush'" (28), so that she can "'take a stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed'" (32), she yields to the notion of a better life based on class and status according to white standards. Her emphasis on Logan's property, his sixty acres, a house bought and paid for with a parlor with the only organ in town, and her derision of feelings as a criterion for choosing a husband, convey the absence of an alternative social directive apart

from the white model.

As a product of the perplexity and exhilaration of the Emancipation period, Nanny's vision is narrowead down to an ambition that deprives her of the capacity to grasp the implications of her assumptions. She can look backwards but she cannot focus adequately on the present, the result of which is extremely ironic. The basic impulse that informs her argument is the fear of male dominance and exploitation, but on embracing the ideal of property as the material base for a solid marriage, she is complying with the system of patriarchal dominance and preparing Janie to accept the passivity and submission that will keep her well within the limits of "'what a woman outhta be and to do'" (31).What she fails to consider is that these limits involve not only a suppression of feelings but also a repression of sexuality, the key element for turning a woman into a sexual object. Unknowingly, Nancy supports conservative social relationships, that are demeaning to a woman.

However demeaning Nancy's arrangements are to Janie, she, at last, surrenders to the former's pressures and accepts ready-made notions handed down by others: "'Did marriage compel love like the sun the day?'" "'... Nanny and the old folks had said it, so it must be so'" (38). Yet, experience teaches her that it is not so. The relationship with Killicks soon aborts her hopes. The nature of their marriage clearly assumes the form of property relations, where dominance of male over female constitutes the prerequisite for the perpetuation of patriarchy's economic basis, the ownership of property. Killicks epitomizes the rural patriarchal authority that exercises full control over the wife's labor and over her person. Sensitive about what is happening to her, Janie senses the self-debasement implicit in their relationship, a form of prostitution sanctioned by legalized marriage. She complains to Nanny: "'Ah wants to want him sometimes. Ah don't want him to do all de wanting'" (41). She then realizes she is no more than part of Killicks' livestock. His concern with her is equal to his concern for sowbelly and corn-bred, sources of sub-

sistence and profit. He is determined to instill in her an interest in the place, while demanding her availability for whatever and wherever he needs her (52). Janie tries to safeguard the little freedom she has in the kitchen by resorting to a rhetorical maneuver: "'Yourse in yo' place and Ah'm in mine'" (52). But for Killicks, this separation of work from home is unfeasible because it can shatter the basis of his property. As a poor landowner, her labor is crucial if he is to produce and prosper. As expected, he devalues her work in the kitchen because it is no real work, since what Janie produces cannot be placed in the market: "'Tain't no use in foolin' round in dat kitchen all day long'" (52).

It is ironic that Janie's first marriage illustrates, with a clear-cut precision, the outrageous mule-metaphor alluded to by Nanny. Set upon having his due, Killicks buys a 'gentle' plough mule for Janie to use. Only then does Janie learn that marriage doesnot necessarily make love come true, a lesson that elicits from her resentment against the people who had failed her (44), and that marks her transition from girlhood into womanhood.

When Jody Starks, the cityfied stylishly dressed man, passes through on his way to make his fortune and be a big voice in the new all-black community of Eatonville, Janie flings her apron on a bush beside the road, in a symbolic gesture of freedom, and runs off with him. Even though he does not represent sun-up, pollen and blooming trees, "he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance" (50), at a time when "the pollen again gilded the sun" (43) and Janie stood around the gate expecting things. Janie is at once fascinated with Joe Stark's appearance, his powerful demeanor and virile image. She is spellbound by the thoughts of "when he would be a big ruler of things with her reaping the benefits" (50). His bourgeois rhetoric articulates the essence of Nancy's dream: "'A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit ou de front porch and rock and fan yo' self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for yo'" (49). Such a definition of herself sounds very desirable to Janie who thinks she can combine her dreams with

the opportunity to indulge in class and status privileges. Soon, however, she finds out that such a definition conceals a life painfully constraining. A pretty doll-baby is an idealization that mystifies the fact that she has become a man's property, or better, a commodity, that cannot ever attain the status of personnood. As Joe's wife, all her possibilities for growth are gradually stunted.

Joe Starks typifies the black version of the white middle class entrepeneur determined to rise and forge an ethics of progress and achievement among the black rural folks in order to lay the groundwork for a black bourgeoisie in the South. Confident in his belief in the efficacy of free enterprise as a decisive factor leading to blacks self-sufficiency, and consequently, to a change in their socio-economic status, Joe directs his rational efforts to make of Eatonville an organized prosperous black town, accumulating in the process, personal power and prestige.

Upon his arrival with Janie, he buys 200 acres of land to be divided into lots for incoming settlers, sets up a store "'tuh be meetin' place fuh de town'" (65), and becomes mayor and leading citizen, responsible for the town's improvements, such as the installment of the post-office and electricity. Endowed with "a bow-down command in his face" (75), and "'uh throne in de seat of his pants'" (79), Joe exercises his will with a charismatic but inflexible disposition that is summed up by Janie's words: "'You changes everything, but nothin' don't change you'" (133). This omnipotent-like quality is virtually postulated, over and over, by Joe himself, through a habit of speech that consists in the repetition of the phrase 'I god' at the beginning of his sentences. In order to consolidate his self-image in the public opinion, Joe builds a house, with porches and bannisters, and paints it "a gloaty, sparkly white, in relation to which the rest of the town looked like servant's quarters" (75). The house becomes a metaphor for the structure of authority and domination that re-

produces, within the black community, the predominant values and class distinctions of the white capitalist society. The white master/black slave analogy, conveyed by the text, must be historically interpreted as the social relations between bourgeoisie and proletariat.

Joe's public role provides the model for his role as husband. His quest for power by means of material possession penetrates into his private life where it reduces Janie into an object for show. Dressed up in silken ruffles like a real lady Janie becomes a mirror that reflects back Joe's economic prestige and his inflated male ego: "he didn't mean for nobody else's wife to rank with her" (66). Gradually, Janie realizes that playing the class role assigned by Joe is anathema to her sense of self because it sinks her identity into Mrs. Mayor, which not only closes off experience but also alienates her from the people: "she slept with authority so she was part of it in the town mind. She couldn't get but so close to most of them in spirit" (74).

Unaware of her growing dissatisfaction, Joe seeks to legitimize his middle-class respectability by curtaing her self-expression. He prohibits her speaking her mind in public, subscribing thus to the myth of woman's place as a means of making believe her silence is natural: "'She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (69). Ironically, his possessiveness and economic drive lead him to contradict this very statement when he forces Janie to menial work in the store. In his opinion, her labor is worth little for she is a helpless, senseless woman with no practical intelligence to undertake her tasks with efficiency. Nevertheless, seeing her as a sort of economic attachment, he insists that she "use her privileges" (86). In reality though, he is downgrading her, for he publicly voices the sexist belief in the natural inferiority of women, becoming, thereby, the leading spokesman for the jokes about women's ineptitude that often circulate around the store: "'Somebody got to think for women and chillum and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don't

think none theirselves'" (110). By commiting Janie to the store, Joe articulates in full terms the sexual politics that maintain woman in a state of total subservience. An important aspect related to economic exploitation and psychological abuse as means of repression is the reppression of sexuality, symbolized in the novel by Janie's head-rag. While in the store, she is ordered to keep her luxurious hair hidden, which from her point of view does not make sense at all. The motives for such a demand become quite clear when seen againt the material context of Joe's world. Control over the woman's boby is integrated into the bourgeois economic assumption that aims to secure ownership and eliminate competition: "'She was there in the store for him to look at, not those others" (87). What Hurston is suggesting here is that patriarchy and bourgeois values combine to perpetuate inequality between the sexes.

Janie's struggle against personal and social worthlessness is best illustrated in relationship to the activities on the porch, where the cultural ethos of the community is expressed through the spoken word. She derives sustenance from the conversations that draw" crayon enlargements of life" (81) but, often, she batters against the barriers of sex and class that smother her desire to participate in the fun and laughter that join the folk after the day's work is over. First of all, she is a woman and, as such, she does not have access to what is considered an exclusive male activity, except as a listener. Second, as the mayor's wife, she cannot socialize with the people who, in Joe's opinion, are trashy because they "'don't even own de house dey sleep in'" (85). But there is also something more, beside her class role, that makes Joe "hustle her off inside the store to sell something" whenever a mule story or a play acting is nearing its climax. There is plain meanness that aims to snatching away any chance that would enable Janie to think and feel herself as a person. When, for example, she manifests a wish to attend the mock funeral of the most popular mule in town, Joe cries

out. His remarks convey the double aspect of the alienation he wants to foist upon her:

> Janie asks: 'You would be dere wid me, wouldn't yuh?'
> He answers: 'Dat's right, but Ah'm uh man even if Ah is de Mayor. But de mayor's wife is somethin' different again. Anyhow they's liable tuh need me tuh say uh few words over de carcass, dis bein' uh special case. But you ain't goin' off in all dat mess uh commoness' (94).

In his vainglorious attitude, Joe is absolutely convinced that his 'big voice' is going to make a big woman out of Janie, in spite of herself. Janie complains with dismay: "'we ain't natural wid one 'nother'" (74). As a result of Joe's insensitivity and his failure to realize what is important for her, their relationship collapses: there is no participation or love, just a chilling alienation. The marriage descends to superficiality, a concession to the artifice of social appearances: "the spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in de parlor. It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again" (111).

Janie's awakening to the stark reality of their relationship is based, primarily, on a recognition of the self-deception that her own inexperienced perceptions and misjudgments had ended up nurturing. Suggestingly, this awakening does not only mark the popular seven-year marriage crisis, but also evolves out of a concrete situation that Hurston is careful to describe in terms of a collective reality: "It happened over one of those dinners that chasten all women sometimes" (111). Because the dinner Janie had prepared fails to meet Joe's expectations, he slaps her face real hard. The incident leads Janie to retrieve the feelings she had bottled up inside and to perceive the lie in which her aspirations were cast:

> She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there

> to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over (112).

After this moment of self-discovery, Janie begins to chart her own private route to personhood by, first of all, clearing a space of her own. For example, she finds out that "She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them" (113), a strategy that addresses her need to maintain an alternative self-respect and sense of autonomy. Though the dissociation of sensibility is, in general, a psychologically perilous position, in this case it functions as a mechanism of survival. She can outwardly conform "to the outside of things" while retaining her emotional integrity.

Eventually, Janie pushes her rebellion outside the interior world into the social space she had been denied access to. Twice in the store. she summons up her strength and expresses her indignation regarding man's self-assigned right to denigrate women. In the first instance, she becomes a spokeswoman for woman's dignity when she intrudes in the conversation in defense of Mrs Tony, object of derision and contempt on the part of the store porch men. Defying the cultural assumptions that validate man's authority, Janie articulates, on the bases of personal experience, her awareness of the common condition of woman:

> 'Sometime God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks his inside business. He told me how surprised he was 'bout y'all turning out so smart after him makin' yuh different; and how surprised y'all is goin' tuh be if you ever find out you don't know half as much 'bout us as you think you do. It's so easy to make yo' self out God Almighty when you ain't got nothin' tuh strain against but women and chickens' (117).

In the second instance, Janie reclaims her trampled

womanhood and, in so doing, exposes the pretense of their relationship. In a broad sense, her address is a reaction against the relentless pressures of nearly twenty years of marriage during which she got nothing "except what money could buy" (118). In a more specific one, it is a repudiation of Joe's sexual politics that dwells upon the devaluation of her body as a means of preserving his vanity. Though described as "a rut in the road," a colloquial image that conveys Janie's dark predicament, she has not lost her self-esteem yet. So, when Joe systematically begins to ridicule her body in the store "to point attention away from his own" (120), Janie is merciless with her verbal artillery:

> 'Now, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you lak de change uh life' (123).

For a man who sees himself suddenly stripped "of irresistible maleness that all men cherish" (123), not ambition nor possessions can efface this moment of moral defeat. It would seem that there was nothing for Joe to look forward to but death, even though his subsequent illness was attributed to a kidney malfunction. When manhood is built upon the subjection of a woman, only a woman has the power to authenticate a man. In the narrow but truthful confines of such an assumption, there is nothing for Joe to look forward to but to death.

The deathbed scene brings Joe and Janie to their final confrontation. This climatic moment evokes a similar scene in Jonah's Gourd Vine, with a reversal in roles. Whereas in the latter, death is willed as a gesture of a woman's protest, death in the present scene is just the consummation of a prior death, the irretrievable loss of a man's identity.

On hearing Joe's charges that she had conjured him, Janie gets exasperated. Not only does she verbalize the frustrations of a wasted life lived in the shadow of Joe's self-image but she is very caustic in dennouncing the tactics he used to keep her in submission:

> 'You ain't de Jody ah run off down de road wid. You'se whut's left after he died. Ah run off tuh keep house wid you in uh wonderful way. But you wasn't satisfied wid me de way Ah was. Now! Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me' (133).

The narrative leaves no margin of doubt that Jody's subsequent death allows Janie to reencounter herself, a fact that is symbolically articulated when she goes to the mirror and rediscovers an image of herself long-time forgotten. The meaning of such a gesture is later reinforced when she burns up all her head rugs. These two symbolic moments mark the turning-point in the development of Janie's consciousness, for only after she retrieves her sexual identity from the fetters of male control and repossesses her body can she question values and attitudes that had kept her in a form of slavery. Bitterly, she apprehends Nanny's role in distorting her "journey to the horizon in search of people" into a back road race "after things" (138). Her initial insight is further explored when Janie historicizes Nanny's limitations, a process that lays bare the preoccupations that had sustained her pragmatism:

> 'She was borned in slavery time when folks, dat is black folks, didn't sit down anytime dey felt lak it. So sittin' on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her. Dat's whut she wanted for me - don't keer whut it cost. Git up on uh high chair and sit there. She didn't have time tuh think whut tuh do after you got up on de stool uh do nothin'. De object wuz tuh git dere. So Ah got up on de high stool lak she told me, but Pheoby, Ah done nearly languished tuh death up there (172).

Janie's speech crystallizes what is central to Hurston's point of view with respect to the interrelation of race, class and sex. On the one hand, the pursuit of economic security and success after the white model is bound to diffuse the racial issue into a question of class differences. For Hurston, the divisions and antagonisms engendered in the process, only tend to maximize the dehumanization caused by racism. On the other hand, the endorsement of such a model is a consent to a class-bound definition of feminity that classes woman off, by turning her into a fragile, passive and dependent being. Janie's repudiation of the sexual bargain that trapped her in the narrow scope of class and sex, or as she puts in, "in the market place to sell" (138), leads her to take a firm stand after Joe's death: "'Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine'" (171).

When Tea Cake, the carefree, fun-loving worker comes along, Janie stops feeling as though she were "marking time" and finds fulfillment in an egalitarian relationship that underscores sharing and companionship instead of stripping her of her rights to be her own woman. In this portion of the novel, the narrative retrieves the nature imagery that had shaped Janie's dream. Tea Cake "looks like the love thoughts of women." He is "a bee to a blossom," crushes "aromatic herbs with every step" (161). In short, he is "the son of Evening Sun" (281) who teaches her "'de maiden language all over'" (173), a reference to her emotional and sexual blossoming in his company. Tea Cake's presence suggests the fusion of the organic harmony of nature with the possibilities of the horizon and that is the reason why Janie promptly responds to him as if he were part of herself: "Seemed as if she had known him all her life" (151). Both in appearance and attitude, Tea Cake is the opposite of Killicks and Stark. Rootless and totally unconcerned with title or property, he appeals strongly to Janie who understands that their relationship is a love game in which each one must be accepted for what

one is with no false pretenses or the pressures that characterized her former marriages. As she explains to Pheoby, in their relationship "new thoughts had tuh be thought and new words said" (173). Her unconditional acceptance of Tea Cake, whose age and class far from matching her own, represents Janie's liberation from romantic notions and social conventions that had led her, in the past, to mistake appearances for reality, sex for fulfillment and marriage for love.

At the start, their relationship is sustained by a sense of equality and respect that educates Janie to appreciate herself and to make use of her resources. She learns that a woman's place is everywhere. Not only does he invite her to play checkers, the men folks game, but he also encourages her efforts, for that matter: "'you got good meat on yo' head'" (147). Understandably, she is elated by perceiving that he thinks it natural for her to play as well as to shoot, to fish, to hunt and to interact with people. Engaging herself in a variaty of activities that had been denied to her before, Janie experiences the feeling of being "a child breaking rules" (155). No more man-made barriers or outside definitions to prevent her from achieving the integration of all her parts that had been disconnected: "So her soul crawled out from its hiding place" (192).

It is in the Florida Everglades, the bean-picking country that Hurston envisions the picture of equality between a man and a woman. Janie goes to work side by with Tea Cake, in a man's overalls, on finding out how much he misses her during the day. In the meantime, she learns that her work opens up a new dimension of human growth and self-expression. Tea Cake, in his turn, spontaneously helps her with the housework afterwards. Their mutual and complementary involvement in private and collective spheres is a measure of the democratic quality of their marriage. With no division of labor, and the consequent blurring of sex-role differentiation, it is natural that work, home and sexuality are intertwined, and it is precisely in relation to their joyful par-

ticipation in this oneness, that they are able to preserve the vigour of their affection. Janie explains: "'we ain't got nothin' tuh do but do our work and come home and love'" (199). For the time being, in a sense their egos merge in their intimacy and yet, in another sense, each remains separate and individualized as ever. Defenses are dropped as Tea Cake assumes and lets Janie share in his "commonness," and prejudices are cast down as Janie considers Tea Cake's gambling.

Through Tea Cake, Janie reappropriates the black identity she had caught a glimpse of when she was 6 years old, looked at her own picture, and first found out she was colored. Larry Neal points out that "Tea Cake represents the dynamic, unstructured energy of the folk."[26] He talks in rhymes, strums his guitar and creates blues right on the spot, embodying in himself, the folk's capacity for oral improvisation. By projecting an important aspect of the group's racial profile, Tea Cake's personality invites an identification with the field laborers. They habitually converge on his house to listen to his songs, as if pulled by a magnet. In addition to that, Tea Cake exhibits the resilient vitality germane to the black rural folk while working in the fields. His exuberance and playfulness makes him a leading figure in "the romping and playing they carried on behind the boss's back" (199), a behavioral attitude that reinforces group solidarity, minimizes racial pressures and turns hard work into a fun game.

In view of these considerations, Janie's life with Tea Cake discloses an important dimension of her identity, for it catapults her into a period of jarring emotional participation in the communal life, which draws her, as never before, close to her racial roots. She fingers in her consciousness the enhanced sense of personhood that such a cultural renewal imparts to her: "What if Eatonville could see her now in her blue denin overall and heavy shoes? The crowd of people around her and a dice game on the floor! ... here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted

to" (200). This immersion in black life and her adoption of a coherent life-style that meets her needs, completes Janie's search for herself and for people, fulfilling thus the wish she had once expressed to Pheoby: "'Ah wants tuh utilize mahself all over." (169)

To compute the significance of Janie's urge to blackness in the distinct cultural milieu of the muck, it is of foremost importance to consider the role of Mrs Turner, in this section of the novel. In fact, Hurston uses this "milky sort of a woman" (207) with a precarious sense of identity to contrast with Janie's racial awareness. As a friend who overlooks the woman to pay homage "to Janie's Caucasion characteristics" (216), Mrs. Turner abides by the principle that blacks should seek to lighten up the race in order to be accepted by whites. Inculcated with the notion that the 'looks' of whites are essential to one's sense of self-worth, she despises blacks, a hatred that is a clear instance of the harmful effect of internalized white stereotypes. For her, blacks like Tea Cake, hold the race back, because they laugh too much, sing' nigger' songs and often, cut the monkey for whites (210). Her negativity towards black life leads her to advocate a special class for people like Janie and herself: "'Us oughta class off'" (210). Janie strongly rejects her proposition "'Us can't do it'" (210). She knows too well what it stands for: an artificial system of dividing blacks and throwing them into unnecessary conflict and animosity. Janie's holistic approach to her race as "'uh mingled people and all of us got black kinfolks as well as yaller kinfolks'" (210) dismisses the negative stereotype of the tragic mulatto aspiring for the white world, and buttresses her consciousness of being part of the folk.

Mrs Turner's casual appearance in chapter sixteen, does not merely function to highlight Janie's blackness. It has a bearing upon the events in the two chapters that follow. As a disruptive element that intrudes into the idyllic world of Janie and Tea Cake, Mrs Turner rep-

resents the incursion of social conventions and white power in the muck, thus foreshadowing the pressures that Tea Cake is ill equipped to cope with, and which lead, indirectly, to his death. A close reading of these chapters shows that there is a built-in inner logic that prepares for the elimination of Tea Cake, as an individual and as a character.

Chapter seventeen focuses on Tea Cake's evolving sexism, on his efforts to validate his male identity vis-à-vis his peers by whipping Janie, which not only "reassured him in possession" but also shows everybody "he was boss" (218). The influx of new elements who come for the bean - picking season, and, particularly, the arrival of Mrs Turner's brother who she secretly wishes to see married to Janie, creates a stressful situation between Tea Cake and Janie. Their mutual jealousies, added to Tea Cake's fear of rejection because of his blackness, irrevocably mar the quality of their relationship. The situation stirs Tea Cake's lingering feelings of manhood and he blindly resorts to the traditional method by which his authority is recognized: physical abuse. Unfortunately, he quickly receives validation: "'Tea Cake, you sho is a lucky man, 'Sop-de-Bottom told him. 'Uh person can see every place you hit her'" (218). Curiously enough, Tea Cake's attitude confirms Janie's prophetic words about marriage: "'It always changes folks, and sometimes it brings out dirt and meanness dat even de person didn't know they had in 'em theyselves. (...) Maybe Tea Cake might turn out lak dat'" (171).

Tea Cake's submission to the social pressures of the black world is further expanded in chapter eighteen to encompass his entrapment in a way of thinking that prevents him from breaking through the constraints of white oppression. The dramatic texture of this chapter is rendered by the description of the devastating hurricane that sweeps the muck and drives the waters of Okechobee lake out to their paths of destruction. In their search for safe ground, Janie is caught by the

swelling waters and is attacked by a mad dog. Tea Cake makes a strenuous effort and succeeds in saving her, but, in the process, he is himself bitten by the dog and contracts rabies. A few days later, Janie is forced to shoot him in self-defense. The critical question that must be confronted here cannot be reduced to a simple and elusive statement about "the tragic and unpredictable forces of nature."[27] The question seems to be why they are caught in the hurricame at all. The answer reflects Hurston's critical judgment regarding Tea Cake's adequacy in the world of the muck.

On the day that precedes the storm Janie observes many warning signs of its coming. The Seminole Indians, the Bahaman workers, reptiles and big animals, all begin marching towards the east. Tea Cake, however, is so engrossed with the economic possiblities of the place that he is not attuned to their significance. The narrator grasps his attempt to deceive himself: "you couldn't have a hurricane when you're making seven and eight dollars a day picking beans" (229). Even though one of the workers points out to him the Indian's authority in deciphering natural signs, Tea Cake shakes off their wisdom and places his reliance on the white folks: "'You ain't seen de bossman go up, is yuh?' (230); '"Dey oughta know if it's dangerous'" (231). His dependency of mind and his greed for money, not only warps his vision but also alienates him comptelely from the natural rhythm of the environment.[28] In this sense, Tea Cake surrenders his free hedonistic identity to the material forces that have placed blacks under the white spectre's control. The text narrowly encourages the reader to view Tea Cakes as a victim of the historical relations of power and dependency alluded to by the narrator: "The folks let the people do the thinking. If the castles thought themselves secure, the cabins needn't worry. Their decision was already made as always" (234).[29] Overall, the development of both chapters undescores his personal inadequacy to function in the world of blacks and whites, which determines ultimately, his

nonviability as a character. Though his death appears to be the natural consequence of his shortcomings it is a fictional device that allows Hurston to discard him, so that she can proceed with her story of Janie.

Tea Cake's acquiescence and acceptance of white values undermines his relationship with Janie for it indicates that he subscribes to what Janie has already rejected, namely, sexism, conventions, the materialistic dream and white models, Consequently, their relationship has reached a terminal point.[30] A sense of finality informs Janie's remarks by the end of chapter eighteen when, on the day following the hurricane, they find safety and shelter in Palm Beach. Unknown to both, Tea Cake's fate is already sealed:

> 'Once upon uh time, Ah never 'spected nothin' Tea Cake but bein' dead from the standin' still and tryin' tuh laugh. But you come 'long and made somethin' outa me. So Ah'm thankful fuh anything we come through together (247).

Janie has attained full humanity by having let Tea Cake point the direction for her to conceive of herself as a creative, self-actualizing human being instead of an inanimate object. But life with him, at this point, is antithetical to her process of growth. She runs the risk of losing the hard - won sense of personhood, poignantly illustrated by his meanness and denigration of her when seized by madness. The fact that she shoots him in self-defense entails, thus, more than a gesture of physical survival and it is a correlative to what Hurston does fictionally. It encompasses the symbolic death of a part of herself, the dependent, reflecting image of Tea Cake in "her sacrificing self" (273)[31], so that she will not become, in the future, the sacrificial victim in the name of a mutuality that has been deflated of its possibilities. Janie undergoes a great sorrow afterwards, but it is a sorrow that consolidates her strength to face the world for what it is and to define her place in it according to her own terms.

The trial scene stresses Janie's alienation from both blacks and whites but nonetheless, gives a measure of her determination to engage herself with the world, no matter how hostile it is, so that she can fight "lying thoughts" (278) and misunderstandnings that label her what she is not. The scene attests to the scope of Hunston's vision as it weaves the elements embedded in the development of the narrative and integrates them into Janie's increasing awareness of the contradictions that permeate race relations. It particularly focuses on the uneasiness of Janie's insertion, as woman and as black, into a context where solidarity is never unmediated but always filtered through layers of racial and sexual prejudices. Once she is charged with the murder of Tea Coke, Janie has to confront the arbitrariness of her position. On the one hand, she is at the mercy of the impersonal strange jurors, representatives of the unassailed white male establishment, and their biased perceptions of black life. On the other, she has to withstand the rage of the black folks who, having to cope with the loss of a friend, packed the back of the courtroom. They epitomize the collective judgmental voice "with their tongues cocked and loaded, the only real weapon left to weak folks. The only killing tool they are allowed to use in the pressure of white folks" (275). The absence of racial kinship [there is no black female in the room] foregrounds the powerlessness of the black woman, alone, suspended between two worlds. By default, Janie gropes for a sisterly kinship with the white women who had come to see her and who share with her, a common predicament in a male-dominated world. Janie's initial mixed feelings about their class differences, are overshadowed by a genuine desire to talk to them: "What need had _they_ to leave their richness to come look on Janie in her overalls? (...) It would be nice if she could make _them_ know how it was instead of those menfolks" (275). This affinity is objectified when Janie is later declared innocent and the women crowd around her "like a protecting wall" (280). Unlike

them, the black folks feel cheated by the verdict. Their predisposition to misinterpret the facts unveils the insidious way in which the circumstances institutionalized by racism sets inevitably the black man against the black woman:

> She didn't kill no white man, did she? Well, long as she don't shoot no white man she kin kill jus' as many niggers as she please. Well, you know whut dey say 'uh white man and uh nigger woman is de freest thing ou earth. Dey do as dey please (280).

Hurston does not foresee any solution for this relentless clash between man and woman. Whatever the quality of their relationship, it is bound to suffer, sooner or later, the impact of black's historical experience. The blight of racism, directly or indirectly, perpetuates a polarization that thwarts their chances for growth. Such a determinism is only mollified when pitted against the fluid possibility of love, that redeems while it lasts: Janie's comparison contains its possibilities and limitations: "'Love is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it's different with every shore'" (284). Outside this domain, there is only the tolerance that evolves out of experience, the only means by which one acquires a broad perspective and full understanding of the conditions and motivations that mold social attitudes. Janie voices Hurston's position when she remarks to Pheoby: "'Let' em consolate theyselves wid talk. 'Course, talkin' don't amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can't do nothin 'else'" (285).

When Janie's ordeals are over, she picks herself up and returns to Eatonville out of her deep attachment to the place where she feels she can preserve her black identity. But she remains basically an outsider because she does not settle for anything less than her freedom, outside the American value system and outside the conventions vouchsafed by men. Even for the womenfolks, Janie is a perversion of the feminine ideal. Pheoby,

who sees beyond artifices, is the only one to grasp the sense of wholeness that emanates from Janie's looks: "'Even wid them overalls on, you shows yo' womanhood'" (14).

The novel shows that each of Janie's marriage experiences was a ladder that vertically propelled her beyond the boundaries of woman's traditional place. It activated her consciousness of sex-roles and identity and helped her to define her priorities as a woman and as a person. Her experiences illuminate the most remarkable qualities of her personality: her resistence in taking the chance in search of the horizon, a metaphor of Hurston's mother's advice to her girl: "Jump for the sun." By the end of her story, Janie has fulfilled her wanderlust, has moved beyond role, and has achieved a mature center of selfhood which can handle its experiences without falling prey to the polarities of despair and hope. Now, she can "live by comparison" (284), in the house that serves as the living repository of her best memories of Tea Cake.

Her journey ends with a retreat into the private space -- her bedroom -- that, though a seeming retreat into interiority, unleashes the dialectical process between the self and the social community. Janie's acquired self-knowledge informs her final message to Pheoby, establishing, however dimly, the possibility of extending its effects into the social reality: "'you got tuh go there tuh know there'" and people "'got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves'" (285). Such a possibility is entertained in the beginning of Janie's narrative. She becomes the voice that, by transference, fulfills an expected function in the community, by passing on the word for others to look and see: "'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf'" (17). She is an outsider, but she wants to belong: not to what it is, but to what can be.

Fittingly, Hurston concludes the novel with a lovely rhapsody in blue. Through the process of imaginative memory, pain is confronted and transcended ar-

tistically, integrating the story of a woman's dream into the mainstream of the expressive and functional mode that characterizes much of Afro-American expression.[32]

> The day of the gun, and the bloody body, and courthouse came and commenced to sing a sobbing sigh out of every corner in the room; out of each and every chair and thing. Commenced to sing, commenced to sob and sigh, singing and sobbing. Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of couse he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see (286).

In Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston recognizes that historically, the black woman has been locked up in a demeaning condition by the black man's determined efforts to organize his world after the dominant structures of patriarchal authority and economic power of the white world. Unless the black man removes himself from this value-making superstructure that warps his sense of humanity, the black woman will be encased in a power relationship that short-circuits legitimate mutuality, personal and social growth. In showing black man's vulnerability, Hurston does not seek to cast him as enemy. The feminist thrust of her novel is tempered by historical consciousness. Through her male characters, Hurston poses a harsh attack on a racism that has bred among blacks the urge to attain self-validation by emulating the socio-economic dream of white manhood. Hurston's racial point of view is submerged by her sexual politics but that does not mean it does not constitute an integral element in the novel's point of view.

Apropos, it is worth quoting James O. Young's crit-

ical comment on the novel:

> [it] is one of the better novels produced by a black writer during the 1930's and despite Wright's contention[33] that it was shallow romance, lacking in protest value, Miss Hurston skillfully wove the romantic elements into a pattern of protest; not race or class protest, but feminine and individual protest.[34]

Without discrediting Young's assessment, it is vitally important to note that both his and Wright's value-judgments, however divergent they are, oversimplify Hurston's achievement by extrapolating elements that, in the novel, coexist and grant it a particular ideological configuration. Whereas Wright's rationale is based on the notion that a black writer only produces relevant fiction when he/she engages in an in-depth portrayal of black anger and rebellion against white society, which is not Hurston's case, Young restricts Hurston's protest to the narrow scope of feminine and individual protest, thus overlooking the social and collective dimension of woman's oppression that the novel suggests, both in its theme and narrative strategy, as well as the interrelation of race and class in dictating the terms of her subordination. Presumably, because Hurston articulated her stance through the point of view of a woman, the terms and scope of her protest were not recognized nor apprehended by the writers of her time and black scholars of today. For Hurston, woman's oppression is intimately linked to racial domination. Therefore, her feminist protest subsumes racial protest; it does not compartmentalize the two aspects of her female character's identity. That is the reason why Janie's rejection of sexism and growth towards personhood parallels a departure from white models to embrace the black cultural heritage.

Finally, there is one more aspect of their Eyes Were Watching God that has hardly received any attention from its critics. Indisputably, it advances an unsentimentalized statement about a woman, alone, out-

side the framework of marriage and its traditional dependencies, who was able to use her resources, among which are her imagination, memory and loquacity, to chart her own historical experience and to channel her emergent female consciousness into a mood for cultural change. It does not suggest that there is an unbridgeable gap between the private and the collective, the individual and the community. Instead, it points to the possibility of forging new alliances, of renewing kinskip, that might transform the sexual and social conjuncture of human relationships. Furthermore, it expresses a desire to integrate the black woman into the community as a maker of culture, rather than as a passive recipient.

In view of these considerations, it is sound to affirm that the novel bears the imprint of an authorial wish-fulfillment, a will to project upon its narrative, a way of acting upon the world in the name of values not yet realized in the existing community. As a socially symbolic act, Their Eyes were Watching God espouses a politics of race and sex that contest the dominant value system and its ideological significations. It relates then, to what is not, and herein lies its oblique relationship with history. Alice Walker is the one black writer who has made the most sensitive and accurate statement about the novel: "Hurston's book, though seemingly apolitical, is in fact, one of the most radical novels (without being a tract) we have."[35]

NOTES TO CHAPTER III

[1] Nathan Huggins' sweeping critical evaluation of Hurston's works in Harlem Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 75, indicates the bias with which her work has been regarded, generally. He views her "tales as general assessment of common Negro character and life" as she handled "the uncomplicated mind" of individuals who "lived for the instant."

[2] Addison Gayle Jr., The Way of the New World (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), p. 144.

[3] Gayle Jr., p. 144.

[4] Nathan Irvin Huggins, Black Odyssey, New York: Vintage Books, 1979, p. 163.

[5] Huggins, p. 164.

[6] Huggins calls our attention to the fact that blacks did not always emulate white mores, especially in relation to moral attitudes about sex. (p. 164) Conversely, E. Franklin Frazier in the essay "The Negro Family in America "in The Black Family, ed. Robert Staples, (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1971), p. 23, makes a radical [and misleading] statement: "In their social isolation, the majority of Negroes were forced to draw upont the meager social heritage which they had acquired during slavery."

[7] Shulamith Firestone explores what she calls "the war of masculinity with the white man" in the chapter called "Racism: The Sexism of the Family of Man" in her book The Dialectic of Sex (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1970), pp. 105-125. Her argument can be historically linked to Joyce Ladner's statement in Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 285. She states that "the advent of the civil rights movement brought into being an assertion of Black masculinity."

[8] Clemmont E. Vontress discusses this issue in "The Negro Personality Reconsidered," Journal of Negro Education, 35 (Summer 1966), pp. 210-217.

[9] Robert Staples, "The Dyad - Part II," in The Black Family, ed. Robert Staples,(Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1971),p. 79.

[10] E. Franklin Frazier, p. 22.

[11] Iva E. Carruthers, "War on African Familyhood," in Sturdy Black Bridges, ed. Roseann P. Bell, Bettye Parker and Beverly Sheftall, New York: Doubleday, p. 236.

[12] I am subscribing here to the main ideas of Terry Eagleton's theoretical discussion about the text's relation to History in Criticism and Ideology (Thetford, Norfolk: Lowe and Brydone Printers Limited, 1978). His main assumption is that History 'enters' the text as ideology. He explains: "It is rather that history is 'present' in the text in the form of a double-absence. The text takes as its object, not the real, but certain significations by which the real lives itself - significations which are themselves the product of its partial abolition. Within the text itself, then, ideology becomes a dominant structure, determining the character and disposition of certain 'pseudo-real' constituents (p. 72)." He adds: "It is, however, intrinsic to the character of literary discourse that it does not take history as its immediate object, but works instead upon ideological forms and materials of which history is, as it were, the concealed underside (pp. 73-74)." According to Eagleton, the text does "have history as its object in the last instance, in ways apparent not to the text itself but to criticism." "The text, we may say, gives us certain socially determined representations of the real cut loose from any particular real conditions to which those representations refer." Here lies what he calls, the distantiation of history. The text refers "to an ideological formation (and hence, obliquely, to history) which 'concrete situations' have actually produced (p.74)."

[13] Jonah's Gourd Vine, Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1934. All further references are to this edition.

[14] Ictalicized in the original text.

[15] Rosemary Ruether New Women, New Earth, New York: Seabury Press, 1975. p. 127.

[16] Robert Hemenway, p. 190.

[17] The scene raises questions about Ann Rayson's insight into the novel, in her article "The Novels of Zora Neale Hurston," Studies in Black Literature, 5 (Winter 1974), p. 2. She states: "John Buddy's crimes are crimes against his better nature, not against others. Never willfully and consciously taking advantage of people, he seems inadvertently to find himself in dubious situations. Lucy is hurt repeatedly by his exuberance, but she realizes that be loves her above all."

[18] The scene ressonates with a mythical allusion. Lucy's situation finds a parallel with the story of Arachne who, in anger, chose to hang herself after having been abused and humiliated by Minerva in a weaving contest. On the other hand, Lucy's last words to John suggests she is 'weaving' his fate.

[19] This Isis recalls the Isis from the story "Drenched in Light."

[20] According to Robert Hemenway, p. 198, [and here I am forced to disagree with his statement], "his [John's] language does not serve to articulate his personal problems because it is directed away from the self toward the communal celebration."

[21] Beatrice H. Royster, "The Ironic Vision of Four Black Women Novelists: A Study of the Novels of Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen Zora Neale Hurston and Ann Petry." Dissertation. Emory University 1975.

[22] It is interesting to confront the novel with Hurston's remarks about it in a letter to James Weldon Johnson (April 6, 1934) and which are quoted in Larry Neal's Introduction to Jonah's Gourd Vine (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1971), p. 6: "... I see a preacher as a man outside of his pulpit and so far as I am concerned he should be free to follow his bent as other men."

[23] A reading of Hurston's autobiography Dust Tracks on a Road brings to light the close parallels between Jonah's Gourd Vine and Hurston's life, particularly the story of her parents' marriage. In the story of John Pearce and Lucy Potts, Hurston exorcises, on the imaginative level, her feelings toward a father who threatened to cut his throat when he heard of Zora's birth [she was supposed to be a son!] and who always resented her defiance and search for a place in the world. In Jonah's Gourd Vine, the fictional point of view converges, thus, with the personal point of view, materializing the dialectic between art and life out of which social relations and their embedded realities emerge as tangible facts to be reevaluated so that, perhaps, they can generate cultural alternatives.

I would like to quote two particularly significant passages from Hurston's autobiography, to illustrate what I have stated above.

"He [Papa] was used to being a hero on the store porch and in church affairs, and I can see how he must have felt to be always outdone around home. I know now that that is a griping thing to a man - not to be able to whip his woman mentally" (p.100). "Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to "jump at the sun." We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground. Papa did not feel so hopeful. Let well enough alone. It did not do for Negroes to have too much spirit. He was always threatening to break mine or kill me in the attempt. My mother was always standing

between us. ...He predicted dire things for me. The white folks were not going to stand for it. I was going to be hung before I got grown. Somebody was going to blow me down for my sassy tongue. ...I was going to tote a hungry belly by reason of my forward ways" (29).

[24] Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978 All subsequent references are to this edition.

[25] Robert Bone, p. 128. Robert Hemenway calls it "her most accomplished work of art" (p. 231).

[26] These rituals include lying competitions, the acting out of courtship rituals, and the telling of folktales.

[27] Larry Neal, "A Profile: Zora Neale Hurston. "Southern Exposure, 1, (Winter 1974), p. 164.

[28] Beatrice H. Royster, p. 124. Larry Neal also circumvents the problem by stating about Their Eyes Were Watching God: "She [Hurston] introduces disruptive forces into essentially harmonious situations" (p. 164).

[29] His attitude violates his inner nature. From this point of view, it is difficult to agree with Robert Hemenway's statement that "with Tea Cake, Janie feels in tune with natural process" (p. 235).

[30] Franz Fannon presents a perceptive study on the so-called dependency complex of blacks in Black Skin White Masks (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), particularly in the fourth chapter.

[31] I would accept with reservations June Jordan's statement about Their Eyes Were Watching God in "On Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston: Notes Toward Balancing of Love and Hatred, "Black World, 23, p. 6. She says that "it is the most successful, covincing and exemplary novel of Blacklove that we have." Such an idealization conflicts with the narrative's point of view, particularly in chapters sixteen and seventeen.

[32] Darwin Turner inadequately addresses this portion of the novel. In In a Minor Chord (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 106, he says: "In Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston weakened the story by the highly melodramatic conclusion."

[33] Ralph Ellison in his essay "Richard Wright's Blues" in Shadow and Act (New York: Random Houses, 1957), discusses the blues as one of the most important elements of Afro-American cultural heritage. His definition is a particularly enlightening one, considering the final description in Hurston's novel. He says: "The Blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in

one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically" (p. 90).

[34] Young refers here, to Wright's criticism of the novel in his essay "Between Laughter and Tears," New Masses, October 5, 1937. On discussiong Hurston's novel along with Waters Turpin's These Low Grounds, he states: "... neither of the two novels has a basic idea or theme that lends itself to significant interpretation" (p. 22). And he goes on, revealing an unrelenting bias that comes near to being offensive: "Hurston seems to have no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction." "The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought" (p. 25). Likewise, but for different motives, Alain Locke also criticized the novel in his article "Jingo, Counter-Jingo and Us" Opportunity, vol. XVI (January, 1938), nº 1, because folklore was its "main point". Locke stated that Hurston's poetic phrase, her dialect and folk humor "kept her flashing on the surface of her community and her characters and from diving down deep either to the inner psychology of characterization or to sharp analysis of the social background" (10). Hurston was hurt by Locke's evaluation, as Robert Hemenway explains in his biography pp. 241-242. Her reactions towards Writght's, however, are filtered through her critical review of Wright's Uncle Tom's Children, which appeared in The Saturday Review, nº 17 (April 2), 1938, p. 32. Her bitterness and sharp ironic tone override any sympathetic treatment of the subject matter. Here are some statements she made:
"... his stories are so grim that the Dismal Swamp of race hatred must be where they live. Not one act of understanding and sympathy comes to pass in the entire work;"
"there is lavish killing here, perhaps enough to satisfy all male black readers;" "Mr. Wright's author solution, is the solution of the PARTY - state responsibility for everything and individual responsibility for nothing, not even feeding one's self. And march!"

[35] James O. Young, Black Writers of the Thirties. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973, p. 220.

[36] John O'Brien, Interviews With Black Writers; New York: Liveright, 1973, 200.

IV - THE MARKS OF OPPRESSION IN MYTH AND HISTORY

In the two novels that constitute the third phase of her fiction, Hurston moved out altogether from the familiar Eatonville milieu. In such dissimilar works as Moses, Man of the Mountain (1939) and Seraph on the Suwanee (1948), which differ substantially from everything she produced before, Hurston sought to affirm her talents as a creative writer, talents that were, more often than not, denigrated by those scholars and critics who refused to view her fiction in terms other than a rendition of black folklore. By venturing, first into the mythic world of Judeo-Christian tradition, and, then, into the historical present of a southern white community, Hurston developed to the limits of her capacity as a novelist. Her refusal to be confined to Negro source material amounted to a literary "passing" which, in the last analysis, bring to full circle the thematic concern that binds her works together into a unified whole. Both novels, either on their narrative underlayers or in their explicit treatment of social relations, deal with the question of oppression. But they also show that there is a common denominator of human experience that transcends racial boundaries and even, the very limits of history itself -- such a denominator is female oppression.

Moses, Man of the Mountain[1] is a fictional recreation of the biblical account of the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt's rule and their struggle for emancipation under the leadership of Moses, who not only leads them out of physical bondage but also fights off a slave mentality that threatens to abort his mission of transforming them into a great nation. The plot is firmly anchored in the biblical events that precede and take place during the Exodus. Although there is no significant

departure from the original text in the Pentateuch, Hurston infused the traditional story with a sense of immediacy that rescues it from its shrouded past and timeless perspective and bestows upon it an artistic veracity and historical relevance vis-à-vis the plight of Blacks in modern America. The Hebrews in the land of Goshem use the colorful Southern folk idiom and refer to their overseer as "bossman". They live in cramped shanty towns that resemble the slave quarters from the plantation of the ante-bellum South. The Egyptian pharaoh is determined, by all means, to preserve the old order -- the slave labor -- and instructs his secret police [the southern white patterollers] in the art of political repression. His place, surrounded by gardens with vast open spaces lit by the sun, immediately call to mind the mansions of southern landowners whose pride and grandeur were founded on black oppression. In short, the circumstances of the Hebrew's enslavement and their subsequent flight to freedom establish the analogy between the Mosaic myth and the slavery and emancipation of American Negroes.

As a racial metaphor, Moses, Man of the Mountain renders, thus, the collective identification of the Negro with the downtrodden Hebrews. Such an identification is buttressed by the image of the chosen people that blacks appropriated from the Old Testament during slavery, and which came to address their needs for signs and symbols by which they could understand and order their experience.[2] Ideologically, this image functioned beyond its religious meaning. It offered blacks a palliative for their sufferings in the oppressive world in which they were forced to live and it served as a vehicle that inspired moral action and disseminated the political and social idea of liberation as a righteous cause. Attuned to the folk traditions, Hurston recounts the collective experience of race emancipation through a skillfull blend of myth and history, the sacred and the profane, the most pervasive characteristic of a people, who, literally, willed themselves reborn.

However, as its name implies, Moses, Man of the Mountain does not limit itself to a simple exploration of racial identity. Being a male-centered novel, it focuses on the figure of Moses, the Judeo-Christian prophet and lawgiver which Hurston deliberately transplants from the Scriptures into the context of Afro-American tradition. In her Introdution, she underscores the cross-cultural significance of Moses who has been worshipped in Africa, the West Indies and even in America, not because he brought down the Commandments, but because he is a god of mystic powers. With his rod, the source of unmitigated power, which by his will, can metamorphose itself into a living serpent, Moses displays a full control over the natural elements and, indirectly, over people. He epitomizes, thus, the voo-doo doctor, the original conjurer of Afro-American folklore,[3] whose powers secure the release of the Hebrews and make him into one of the greatest political leaders of all times.

It is precisely Hurston's particular awareness, as a writer, of the connection between power and politics in her initial portrait of Moses, that provides the key for an approach to the novel that makes it something other than a replay of biblical events, a racial metaphor or a display of voo-doo knowledge. Once the line of critical inquiry is adjusted to this angle of vision, it is only proper to state that the novel dwells on the theme of power and powerlessness, a theme that pervades the narrative in a three-fold development.

First of all, there is the relationship of oppression and subjugation between the Egyptian master and the Hebrew slaves in a society characterized by a strong class-caste system. The suppression of the slaves as a people is symbolically encoded in the last provision of the official decree that rules the death of Hebrew newborn sons. It is only fit that in a context dominated by a patriarchy, the powerlessness of the lower-class [the slaves] is crystallized in the denial of their rights to procreate male children. The consequence, is the emasculation of the male slave, who finds himself

impotent to fulfill his male role: to protect and seek the welfare of wife and offspring. This situation causes Amram to utter his outrage during Jochebed's labor: "'I don't feel like no man at all'" (p. 19). It is on this level that Hurston's depiction of power relations most clearly evokes the historical circumstances fostered by the American slave system.

Second, there is the relationship between Moses, the high-class political leader, and the Hebrew masses. Although there had been a prior consent regarding Moses being accepted as a leader, his actual position was not the manifestation of a consensus. Moses practically imposed himself and consolidated his role with the power of his lifted right hand, a "symbol of terror and wonders" (p. 150), with which he was able not only to defeat the pharaoh, but also to manipulate and keep the masses under his control. The text explicitly points out Moses' desire to be powerful in the early phase of his apprenticeship, during which he learned "to taint men with the fear of life," and experienced the ego-enhancing feeling of seeing "a certain mastery over people" (81). Both his aristocratic breeding and the amount of power and authority he exercises among the people constitute the basis of his rising as the supreme ruler during the period of change that transformed a tribal and enslaved people into a stratified and free society. He is the ruler with the ability to inflict pain and death and who comes to represent the institutionalized power of the newly formed Hebrew state.

To a certain extent, there is an authorial alignment with regard to Moses' access to power. The narrative underlines the fact that only an iron hand could have undertaken the task of leading a psychologically dependent people, often ready to bow to the supremacist mentality (pp. 232-233) and for whom the responsibilities that come from assuming one's freedom mean a newly unasked for burden. In the dispassionate picture of the ex-slaves, Hurston shows her profound understanding of mass psychology. The masses are still perplexed with the

sudden change in condition and status. Their weaknesses and constant bickering about food, water and housing during their wanderings in the wilderness, suggest the narrowness of their aspirations and their incapacity, for the time being, to measure up to the scope of the possibilities that Moses' actions disclose to them. Once their apathy and accomodation are challenged by Moses' rulings, they become insubordinate against him and, nostalgically, recall the good old days in Egypt (p.308) as a strategy of resistance against his plans.

Their relationship is, consequently, a relation of constraint that marks the power relations between unequals. When asked by the people what is the sign of his god, Moses answers "His sign is power" (174). Since in the people's experience, power is what emanates from Moses himself, it is only natural that in their minds they establish an equation between Moses and God. Such an equation, that stands for unmitigated power, throws in a sharper light the masses' unrelieved helplessness. Hence, their intimidation and distrust (pp. 242, 249) of someone who has attained a more than human status (280).

In the development of the story, it becomes clear that class origins accentuate the distance between Moses and the Hebrews, thus increasing the gap between power and powerlessness. Though Moses tries to speak in the people's dialect, his speech cannot but betray the fact that he has belonged, and always will, to an educated elite (252), whose point of view clashes with the masses! His rhetoric of freedom (308), highly idealistic, is counterbalanced by the collective voice whose concrete, down-to-earth statement upsets the expected effect of Moses' speech: "... it's hard to love freedom if it keeps you hungry" (309). It is evident that for someone like Moses, who has never lived on the edge of survival where eating is a central fact of both necessity and pleasure, the question of food is a mere trifle.

Hurston is, no doubt, fascinated with the character of Moses, but it does not prevent her from giving the

reader a sense that, at times, he is enthralled by his own power, which makes his leadership oppressive in nature. In fact, what underlines Moses' political consciousness is the rhetoric of the oppressor, present in his early meditations on politics. Convinced that people love force, he makes a statement that, though slightly ironic, is very suggestive in the light of his actual role: "Oppress them and you are a great ruler" (106). His role shows there is no discrepancy between his saying and his doing, which allows the reader to view him as an oppressor. His extrapolation of authority, his lack of equanimity and impatience with the Hebrews' slave mentality, make the Hebrews feel as if they are entering into another form of slavery under a master whose greatness means a wrathful temper and an absolute will. Aaron, the priest and allegedly Moses' brother, despite his opportunism, makes remarks that throws Moses into deep thought: " 'maybe there's a lot of things you dont't understand. Maybe sometime you'll find out you can't dog people around and dominate'em as you see fit'" (310). What Moses finds out is summed up, towards the end of the novel, in a last insight into the vagaries of being powerful. Responding to Joshua's comments about King Balak's defeat in spite of his power, Moses says: " 'It's a good thing for anybody to know just how much they have and when to stop' " (343).

On developing the theme of power in connection with Moses' relationship with the masses, Hurston dramatizes the question of individual stature as a necessity, not a choice, during the period of consciousness-raising and the organization of collective life in its struggle for emancipation. On the other hand, the narrative concomitantly raises the question of how much power one individual can dispose of without subserving personal aggrandizement in a system of marked class differentiations, and without incurring the excesses that may subvert the very cause of freedom and may identify him as an oppressor. Hurston's awareness of the complex form of politics and hierarchy, validated by the ideol-

ogical structure of patriarchy, that surface in a period of national emancipation and cultural identity, makes her novel, from the point of view of its being a racial metaphor, a general comment on leadership among the Afro-Americans involved in the process of emancipation of Blacks in America, emancipation meaning freedom, both from physical bondage, and from psychological and intellectual subservience to the values of the dominant culture.

On the third level development of her theme, Hurston articulates what can be regarded as the masked dimension of her novel. Masked because it is hidden behind the more obvious narrative concerns of racial and class oppression. It is a dimension that adds a particular qualification and focus to the theme of power and powerlessness and its importance arises precisely from its apparent, and yet so central, marginality.

From the perspective of a feminist critique, Moses, Man of the Mountain is a story that dwells on the opposition between male power and female dissent and its narrative development captures the subtleties of male triumph and female defeat as the main female character is reinstated into the 'natural' female condition of dependency, inferiority and powerlessness. The theme evolves progressively from Hurston's insight into the sexual hierarchy in the contexts of both Egyptian and Hebrew cultures. Whereas the Egyptian princess is a mere "passageway" for boy children, the Hebrew woman is perceived as a nothing but a woman, whose major contribution |and duty| to collective life is her sexuality by which she can provide the family patriarch with children, preferably male, so that he can hold up his head among the community. As the text suggests, in broad tems, the cultural devaluation of the female,[4] it focuses, particularly, on the amount of power allowed to woman in a culture whose most salient feature is patriarchy, and where her status derives basically from her biological function. Patriarchy coalesces in the social and religious values that define the Hebrew

world. Its ideological manifestation lies in a structure of gender-marking that has determined power to be a male pursuit and female power to be deviant and therefore, a threat to community norms. In the characterization of Miriam, the strong willed Hebrew prophetess who struggles to maintain her leadership among the Hebrews after the departure from Egypt, and in the portrait of Zipporah, Moses' pampered upper-class wife who has internalized the male ideology of the feminine, Hurston dramatizes the two poles of female reaction to male power: dissent and conformity.

Both female characters play background roles in a context dominated by males. Both are subjected, though their reactions diverge, to the mechanism of social control that reduces them to an absence, or to silence. The novel deals with cultural givens in relation to woman and that is the reason why the text is steeped in patriarchal ideology. It could not have been otherwise, since Hurston is handling a story that traditionally, pictures a man's world from a male point of view, as it is the case of all the episodes that make up the Bible. Yet, the fact that the text encapsulates some areas of tension and stress that underlie woman's uneasy relation with the power structure that renders her inarticulate, areas which are absent in the biblical text, is an indication that the text does not internalize the mythologizing of woman but places the 'naturalness' of her condition in historical and social terms. Consequently, the text bears inscribed within its writing the presence of a particular point of view which, impinging upon a traditional story, frames its content to encompass a woman's reality within a man's world. As it is, the novel charts what happens when a woman's power is no longer recognized in the public world of social politics, when her language is no longer considered the 'official' discourse and she is perceived as a disruptive individual. Such a development, suggestingly, takes place in the transition from a polytheist to a monotheist cult. And it is worth noting here that Moses' rod of power, with

which he consolidates his authority and which is the signature of God himself, adds a phallic stress in the novel, a stress legitimized by a transcendental divinity, a father figure. It is against this patriarchal world of religious and social values that Moses, Man of the Mountain portrays the oppression of woman: Zipporah's entrapment in her sexual role; the power relations between Moses and Miriam; Miriam's strategies to keep her identity; the psychic tensions that accompany her yielding to power and the trap of envy and guilt, deception and frustration that ensues from the submission of her subjectivity.[57]

In consonance with its themes, the novel begins with a striking image that skillfully blends into a unified whole the explicit and the covert strains of its narrative. The image evokes the pathetic situation of the Hebrew women in labor, forced to silence their sufferings in caves and unnatural places, in order to escape from the Pharaoh's wrath. Such a sexual image thrives in its ideological implications -- racial oppression is effected by interference and the attempt to suppress the female freedom to use her procreative powers. The unlimited power of the state, embodied in the Pharaoh, acting upon the family and, specifically, upon the female body, warrants the analogy between the plight of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt and the conditions of the enslaved Blacks in America. The image, in its pervading simplicity, draws out some interesting elements. Judea, the noun generally used to designate the Hebrew estate and a synonym for Palestine, is considered a feminine noun. Thus, it was only appropriate that Hurston should crystallize the Hebrew's political plight in an image that has a clear gender marking. Furthermore, beyond its historico-linguistic aspect, the image encodes the male--female polarity. The antagonism established between the womb and the law -- the womb is subjected but it is also indifferent to the law because it is the master of its own process (p.11) -- points to the struggle between two forms of power; the female power, driven

underground, but still with the capacity to defy the institutionalized power, which is male. From this angle, the relation the Hebrew women versus the Pharaoh suggests a symbol system that incorporates all power relations - not only between master [Egyptian] and slaves [Hebrews], blacks and whites, but also between male and female. In this sense, the female condition, as evoked in the initial image, encompasses the reality of oppression that is, both literally and metaphorically, the element that structures and gives meaning to the Moses's world.

Yet, a close examination of the novel shows that its narrative departs from what its beginning implies. If, on the one hand, the avowed unity of its image implies that racial and sexual oppression are correlatives, on the other hand, the narrative development effaces, somewhat, this unity by emphasizing the fact that the subjection of woman and, likewise, her reaction to the status quo, transcend caste and race identifications, and emerge, paradoxically as it may be, in the very process that subverts oppression and engages liberation.

An early glimpse into this situation is given on the occasion of Moses' birth which, according to the legend explored by Hurston, was the second male child of Jochebed and Amram. As soon as the latter finds out his wife has given birth to a son, he demands the child from the midwife and, convinced that it is better for his son to die in his own hands than to be violated by the Egyptians, is determined to kill him. Jochebed rises against Amram's logic, a logic that places him on the side of the oppressor because it anticipates his will. Jochebed's perceptiveness and defiance against what is pre-determined by law, leads her to remark: " 'If Pharaoh done scared all the love out of its papa, them let all Egypt come against me' " (25). Amram's retort betrays his underestimation of woman's intellect, her capacity for judgment and discernment " '... Sometimes ordinary love and courage ain't enough for the occasion. But a woman wouldn't recognize a time like that when it come.' "

Instead of a self-defensive statement, Jochebed answers back with a question that exposes her thinking and, therefore, veils an accusation: " 'Is my son got a Hebrew for a father or a Pharaoh?'" This is such an interesting question because it addresses our early assumption about Amram's attitude as a form of alignment with the oppressor.

The dialogue between husband and wife hints, in short, at the domestic power relations which are not exactly portrayed as oppressive, but rub off because of different points of view. One relies on a deterministic view of the world, accepts the givens,—submits to power and shows a predisposition to internalize its chauvinistic aspect. Another humanizes, because it is fed on hopes, hopes that buttress the militant idealism that can forge a new reality. The story itself, bears witness to the fact that Jochebed's contentiousness, her strength to say 'no' to the male rule [the Pharaoh's decree and her husband's will]:"'No! My son is going to live'"(p. 25), is the stuff out of which people's hope for change can grow. It is woman's capacity to envision a new order of things, and her willingness to act, even if it means an alignment with the Egyptian Princess, "a very fine woman," that cause Amram, later on, to rationalize, sarcastically, about the links of woman and power. His rationalization is founded upon his misconception and stems from his wounded pride:

> 'Oh, you women!(...) You are always ready to go with the conqueror. You recognize nothing but power. If it is a woman, a cow, a ewe, a doe or whatever female it is - let the male fight and die for her, and the moment that he is thoroughly beaten or killed, she gives herself to his conqueror' (p. 50).

The fallacy of Amram's statement is exposed in the person of his own daughter Miriam, the resolute prophetess, whose influence and revolutionary groundwork among the masses before the emergence of Moses, made of

her a strong and shrewd leader of her people. Depicted as homely and unwed, and having an existentially precarious type of independence in a patriarchal social structure, she, however, stands on her feet as a woman who had had an important function in the religious practices of the Hebrews, including the worshipping of Isis, a cult that, after the Exodus, is considered illicit in view of the implantation of Moses' father religion.

Hurston's version of the biblical Miriam is infused with some foreign elements that cannot be overlooked if we are to understand fully the significance of her presence and her plight in Moses' world. Whereas the biblical Miriam appears only three times in the story of the Exodus,[6] and is mainly known for rousing the Hebrew devotion to God, Hurston's Miriam is identified primarily in terms of her contentiouness and her desire to share Moses' power. A clarification of her position becomes, at this point, a prerequisite to understanding her reactions to the new order that Moses represents. More than just a prophetess, Miriam is endowed with a special kind of knowledge that defines her, according to her brother Aaron, as "a two-headed woman," a title that places her on equal grounds with Moses (280). She combined, thus, in herself, the power of word and deed -- a power that lifted people from their helplessness, gave them a sense of tomorrow and inspired their visions of hope. Even though as a slave girl she had once been awed by the sight of the Egyptian princess whose beauty and glamour stood for the feminine ideal, one is right to assume that her political consciousness and the priority she assigned to the Hebrew struggle drove her away from the trappings of those appearances as well as from playing the conventional female role. As a woman, her biological function is shifted and realized on the social level, where she exercises a function that is, symbolically, procreative -- the alliance of word and deed creates the possibility for new realities -- and is, politically, a survival strategy.

When Moses emerges as the new lea

Miriam has to step down and relinquish her power. First, because her function is stripped of its social and religious relevancy. The process of liberation is under way. The power of word and deed has become a male function, has received a divine sanction and is assimilated into the phallic power that is crystallized in the figure of Moses. Second, because as a woman, she is defined as auxiliary to a male undertaking. That means that her actions must submit to a set of patterns that reduce their scope, and her individuality and self-expression must be shaped in a new form, a form that yields to the disposition of a social and religious hierarchy that enforces male supremacy.

Miriam's predicament is illustrated upon Moses' arrival in Goshem, and in the subsequent conversation he carries on with Aaron. Summoning the Elders of the tribes for their first meeting, in which he hopes to lay out his strategies, Moses "was surprised to find a woman among them" (p. 171). A conspicuous condescending tone underlies his reply to Aaron's explanation of their kinship: " 'But what is she doing here? I have called the Elders to me on serious business.' " On hearing Aaron extolling Miriam's influence and power among the people, Moses "closed his eyes for a moment" as if to dismiss what he hears. And then he defers but not without bias: " 'In that case we need her. Tell her to stay. She would be useful in handling the women.' " Later, Aaron explains how Miriam's magic and sorcery, "a certain bundle that she makes" (172), have helped the people. Moses ironically questions the efficacy of such a practice, a questioning that is intellectually sound but that betrays arrogance and underestimation, not only of Miriam's role, but of people's beliefs, as well:

> 'Hmm! It's a wonder every Hebrew in Egypt wouldn't have one of them. Pharaoh and his overseers wouldn't be a bit of trouble then. Why haven't you and Miriam done that on a large plan and freed Israel long ago?'

Miriam is absent in this scene and Aaron, though her brother, is not the appropriate person to advocate her rights. He has a "petulant look" on a "goat-like face." He is a cunning and weak man who is set upon sharing the credit for the Exodus, credit that he can only conceive in material terms. He wants the regalia and pomp commensurate with his position. Although the reader soon learns to detect the content of personal motivations concealed in his pleas for Miriam, one has to grant his honesty in describing the importance of her social role. The prospect of a power struggle, however, is something that Moses' plans have not anticipated. Nor does he entertain any desire of taking it as a real possibility. Appropriating the terms of Aaron's apology about Miriam's call to prophecy to the people, Moses makes clear his antagonism by applying his male reasoning with which he self-assigns his territory and, therein, rules out competition: " '... if you, I mean Miriam, is called to prophecy to Israel and I am called to save Israel, our paths don't conflict at all"(p.172).

Miriam's presence is revealed to be a thorn in Moses' side. Her status is an anomaly because it threatens the fundamental social model of domination. Minimizing her importance and suppressing her divine role become, therefore, a requirement for the consolidation of patriarchy, and of Moses' leadership. Thus, her sex does not allow her to join the rank of official priesthood which Aaron, in spite of his despicable character, is invested with. And her powers are politically marginalized, or pushed into darkness, a process analagous to that which the image of the Hebrew women in labor evokes.

To counteract an imminent loss of identity, Miriam develops her own strategy which, characteristically, relies on the word. Thus, on leading the celebrations by the Red Sea upon the defeat of Pharaoh's army, she does not chant to the Lord. Unlike the biblical Miriam who exclaims " 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously. The Horse and the rider have been drowned in the sea,' "[7] Miriam leads the women in singing " 'Oh,

Miriam played the symbal over the Red Sea' " (p. 239).

Such a deviation from the traditional text gives a measure of Hurston's authorial presence consciously liberating a meaning other than the inherited one, a meaning that reaches deep into the problematic of Miriam's insertion as a female in a context where she is forced to assume a lesser role and that, at the same time, implicates in an act of insubordination against that very same context. The symbolic content of her discourse is a fact that cannot be ignored. The naming dislodges Miriam from the role of 'other,' that is, the one over whom power is exercised, to constitute an affirmation of subjectivity. In its anti-social connotation, the discourse is transformed into a possessed singing, by an all-female chorus that names what cannot be named and, therefore, subverts the misogynist norm. As if to attest to its subversive content, the singing is accompanied by dancing and clapping, manifestations of a body language that make Miriam evoke the prophetess of a primitive sensual religion that is losing grounds to the abstract spirituality of a new order.

As the consolidation of Moses' rule makes Miriam's position more and more precarious, she presses for a reconsideration of her and her brother's past achievements. At first reluctant to forward her complaint to Moses, and inclined somewhat to act vicariously through Aaron[8] as if she has been gradually internalizing her 'otherness,' she succeeds, however, in verbalizing what, for her, is more than a legitimate claim: "...'You and Jushua is everything and me and Aaron ain't nothing. And we're the very ones that got this thing together and kept it together all down the line' " (262). In this scene, Miriam is shown to stand side with Aaron, which does not mean that the reader has to regard her as someone who subscribes to his crass materialism. He has "the look of weak brains and strong pride," a description that clearly implies the narrator's value-judgment upon his character, a value-judgment that is absent with regard to Miriam's. Whereas Aaron's efforts center on

using Miriam as a stepping stone to status and honors, Miriam's interest lies in both a recognition of what she was, and a position of leadership alongside Moses. She is granted the first, but not the second. At the end of their meeting, before setting our for Sinai, Aaron makes a suggestion to Moses. Although his words must be taken with reservations, it must be conceded that its underlying motivations do not invalidate the importance of what he says. Aaron suggests:

> 'Look like you could stand her up before the people and tell'em that you back her up as a prophet and look on her as a great one on - er - on equality with the best. It would mean a whole lot to her' (263).

Moses' reply does not have anything to do with the specifics of Aaron's suggestions. Instead, he remarks about his recognition of their need for rich regalia that will keep them " 'from feeling like slaves again...' ". His address intentionally avoids confronting what Aaron meant. This silence attests to the hostile energy activated at the suggestion of Miriam being placed on an equal plane, a silence that creates the psychological climate that perpetuates unequal power relations. What Moses does say discloses the fact that he does not make a distinction [and, perhaps, herein lies one of his strategies!] between Aaron and Miriam, a distinction that the reader has to make at the risk of misinterpreting Miriam's motivations.[9]

The arrival at the Hebrew camp of Zipporah, the Midianite wife of Moses, brings out all the bitterness and resentment of Miriam who perceives the former's identification and alliance with the dominant power structure. Zipporah is a beautiful and shallow woman, the product of a male-centered and male-dominated context and, therefore, a good model of female prescribed roles, roles that only assume social importance by virtue of her identity as Moses' wife and the mother of his progeny. While Moses wanders through countries and deserts and engages in colonizing wars that consolidate

his male political power, Zipporah cannot "follow him past the door of the tent" (144). Neglected as a person, for Moses never seems to regard her as a companion but, rather, prefers the company of her father, Jethro, Zipporah gives full vent to expressing a self that seizes upon the charms of femininity and the accoutrement of gracious living as a form of existential alternative. Thus, she urges and presses Moses, either to claim his right to the throne of Egypt, or to make himself a king of the Hebrews so that she can be a queen and enjoy the privileges that such a station would afford her. Of course responding to her conditioning as female, Zipporah can only conceive her privileges in terms of material possessions -- as mistress of the palace and as a bedecked woman -- which makes her into an accomplice of her own inferiority for they entrap her in a world of meaningless triviality. Her father jeers at her weakness:

> 'You are just like all the rest of the women - ready to upset the whole world to make an opportunity to dress yourself up in ornaments. That is all women around Kings are good for (...) Fix it so you won't have no competition, then parade your swag in front of the others and let'em look on and envy you ...' (142).

Unwittingly, he deprecates what has been precisely a construction of the patriarchal ideology of the feminine: the powerless woman who channels her potentials into the trappings of appearances.

Given the facts of Zipporah's character, it is inevitable that her presence in camp stirs antagonistic feelings between herself and Miriam. On spotting her among the womenfolks, Zipporah promptly observes and pokes fun at what makes Miriam different from the female norm: her desexed demeanor. Her peremptory disdain is markedly informed by her caste prejudices: " 'Oh, she just has the look of never having been loved. She has that terrible look of never having been nuded by a man.

I don't want her near me if I can help it' "(268). Moses explains: " 'It's her idea of what a leading woman ought to look like. She's the leader of the women of Israel, you know.' " But because he recognizes her as someone who acts, who conducts, he is quick to evaluate and reduce her importance, which constitutes, at a deeper level, a rationalization of his position: Miriam, after all, has " 'no talent for leadership.' " Once her incompetence is asserted, there is room for a benevolent paternalism: " 'Life has been cruel to her. Don't judge her.' " (268).

Miriam's intention to welcome Zipporah and, concomitantly, to impress her office on her, wears away when she catches a glimpse of her. Taunted by the sight of glitter and elegance, she undergoes a trying moment of psychological tension that ferrets out her inmost frustrations and anxieties. On the one hand, she has to overcome her self-hatred at comparing her rough clothing and her "gnarled fists and square feet all twisted and coarsened by slavery" with the "well-cared-for hands and feet" and "the fine raiment of the woman on the camel" (269). Her deeply-rooted sense of inferiority that makes her vulnerable to an image that evokes memories of her slavery,[10] clashes, on the other hand, with her consciousness of having become what she is now, a free subject, entitled to keep the space in where she can evolve a sense of self-worth. Her consciousness cleaves on the perception of Zipporah as an instrument that will "bewitch the eyes of foolish women" (270), at the service of the power structure that is trying to displace her. Miriam's tongue becomes the weapon with which she lashes out her rebellion:

> 'Look at the hussy! ... Look at her trying to look like Mrs. Pharaoh! That Moses and his tricks. ... I'll show him. I'll show her too. I don't aim to be robbed out of my labor like that ...'

In her momentary helplessness that feels like the ground is swept from under her feet, Miriam is caught in

a web of self-contradictory impulses. The reader may detect her feelings of loss at observing Zipporah's beauty, and along with it, a pinch of jealousy that gloss her perceptions, without however distorting them. Such feelings lose their substance, however, for a soaring anger emerges when Miriam realizes the womenfolks' response to Zipporah's presence. She is merciless in her condemnation of the follies that divert women from their committment to their cause: " 'Look at you! Running and gaping behind a woman and what she got on when we come here to this mountain to meet our God...' " (271). Her outrage is validated by a narrator who shows disdain towards Zipporah's exclusiveness and corroborates the former's perceptions. Indeed, as if cast under a spell, the Hebrew women "had not more interest in prophecy and politics." Instead, they became interested "in the earrings of Mrs. Moses and her sandals, and the way she walked and her fine twined colored linens" (273).

Miriam, who transcends self-pity and dependency, can see clearly the implications behind the women's enslavement to a female image that being class-bound, is part of the structure of oppression that reduces the Hebrew women to a bewildered powerlessness. Her awareness of class distinctions is here necessarily linked to race distinctions, an issue that Miriam manipulates to gain back the women's allegiance. On attacking Zipporah as "the Black Mrs. Pharaoh" she is not, necessarily and merely, being racist, but using the only means by which she is sure of shaking the women to reality. She, thus, poses Zipporah as a very concrete threat: the infiltration of a foreigner whose goal is " 'getting control of the womenfolks ... root me out as a leader ...' and so 'get you all back into slavery again' " (296). Jethro's words are a confirmation of Miriam's fear: "... 'All her life, my daughter's been going around looking for a throne to sit on' " (266). Miriam might have a perverse tongue but she is not a short sighted woman. The suggestion that class and race differences, as embodied in

Zipporah, subserve the power of patriarchy and, therefore, are instruments of oppression, clearly surface in her discourse. Oppression is shaped by the particulars of class, race and sex, for Zipporah's glamour is nothing but a mirror image of Moses' power. Under the hatred Miriam directs towards Zipporah, lies what she resents most: Moses, " 'the boss of everything' " (298).

It is Miriam's quest for equality in power that Moses, repeatedly chooses to ignore. Characteristically, he shrugs off her political aspirations with an explanation that relishes the rivalry of women: " '...The women all are making admiration over my wife and now Miriam is jealous and spiteful' " (299). Undeterred by Moses' belittlement, Miriam becomes more irreverent, her attitude more defiant. Not only does she invoke the assistance of Isis (283) and gather the women to protest in front of Moses' tent, [a version of modern picketing], but she also insists on naming herself, a belligerant attempt to assert her identity: " 'I was a prophetess in Israel while he [Moses] was herding sheep in Midian' " (300). Moses is aware that Miriam's claim threatens his position. It is not surprising that he resorts, then, to the most insidious way of abusing her -- he reviles against her "unnaturalness," another myth forged by patriarchy to keep woman in her place: " 'Miss Miriam, your case is pitiful. The trouble with you is that nobody ever married you. And when a woman ain't got no man to look after, she takes on the world in place of the man she missed ...' " (300).

Miriam's reckless refusal to be silent reaches a climax when she challenges the order of things and claims divine sanction for what Aaron and she say. Such a blasphemy cannot but lead her to her fall. Miriam is smitten with leprosy as a punishment for her daredevil tongue. Labelled unclean, or sinful, she is confined outside the camp for seven days. Her experience of disgrace and total alienation does not leave her unscathed. When she comes back and joins the group, she is entombed in silence: "Those seven days outside the camp seemed

to put a veil between her and the world which never lifted." Her muteness is only broken now and then, when her words, loaded with guilt and awe, translates the structure of power, of patriarchal religion, in which there is no distinction between Moses' and God's judgment: " 'He lifted his right hand. I saw him do it. He lifted his right hand and the thing come upon me. ... His right hand was clothed in light' " (301).

The symbolic content this episode might hold for a modern audience is worth some comment. Truly, it illustrates the plight of a woman in a misogynist patriarchal society that refuses to recognize her worth and her desire to pursue a role outside the conventional limits assigned to the female role. Her rebelliousness against the social arrangement is made to appear evil, an evil that takes on cosmic proportions with the divine interference -- God, the Father, punishing through Moses' lighted hand -- that reinforces and, even, sanctifies male power. In fact, Moses' lifted and lighted right hand -- the official signature of phallic power -- significantly functions as the tool for the psychosurgery that subjugates Miriam's mind. Leprosy is the metaphorical tumor that grows out from a psychic violation. It does not escape the attentive reader that in this climactic scene, the debasement of a woman's body is intimately linked to the obliteration of both her will to be, and her freedom to express herself.

The text suggests that woman's speech is her strength, but it also exposes her to a threatened existence because it encodes her problematic relation to power. Forcing a woman to silence is, thus, the only means by which her defeat is secured. She is deprived of the instrument with which she can think and question the world around her. Miriam's silence is, indeed, a metaphor for her invisibility as female and as a person in a context where the structure in which female aspiration can be articulated, are dictated by the dominant, invariable, male. Moses verbally endorses Zipporah's luxuries but he cannot cope with Miriam's request.

The last confrontation between Moses and Miriam, some years after her seven-day confinement is the most unsettling scene of the novel, because two layers of discourse collide in Miriam's speeches: one layer that reflects the distortions in the area of self-concept, distortions resulting from her submission to a relation of violence; another layer that discloses a conscious manipulation of language in order to attain a certain end. Convinced that she must obtain Moses' permission to die since he has been holding his hands over her head all those years, Miriam stands in front of him like a hostage in captivity, and begs him to be released from life. The scene, for the reader, reverberates with echoes of an analagous earlier situation: the Hebrews pleading for freedom in front of the Pharaoh. The difference in such a parallel is that, for Miriam, liberation is vested with a terrible and sole meaning: death. Freedom means death. In choosing death, instead of death-in-life, Miriam makes the only existential gesture that will allow her to be. It is a self-destructive gesture, for that matter, that is going to put a halt to Moses' possession of her body, and is going to rob the oppressor of the object upon which he imprints his power. Her subdued self merges, thus, with a self-seeking assertion. Her face is, significantly, like a mask and, as the narrator points out, "Everything about her was asserting itself that day" (318). Such a duplicity can be promptly detected in her speech. Initially, on addressing Moses, she is contrite, ready to concede her defeat and to confess that her power is no match for his:

> 'Moses, I come in the humblest way I know how to let you know I done quit straining against you. I done quit putting my poor little strength up against yours. I'm just a beat old woman and I want to die' (319).

As she goes on to answer Moses' question about whether she is in her right mind, she adds: "...'I reckon I done tackled something too big for me and it done throwed me

like a bucking horse.' " At this point, the reader wonders about the determinants of her expression: humility or cunning, conformity or manipulation, honesty or deceit? Only Miriam's subsequent revealing addresses, in which she struggles to describe how she has been experiencing her identity ever since her punishment, and her long-time decision to die, can illuminate this important critical question. Miriam explains:

> 'Ever since I spent that week outside the camp when, er-when I was a leper. When I was unclean and had the leprosy and looked at myself all over and I was shut out from everything and from the living. That was when I got to thinking with only certain places in my head and I got to fleeing all over with fear. And you showed me your hand, that shiny right hand of yours, every night while I was outside the camp there in the dark. You kept it held up over my head and I'd run and run all night long but I couldn't get away from it. You see, I was a prophetess back in Egypt and I had power, that is what the people told me anyhow. So when you didn't do to suit me, I made up my mind to fight your power with mine. But I found out I was no more against you than a grain of sand against a mountain, because you beat me and then you bottled me up inside of my own body and you been keeping me in jail inside myself ever since. Turn me loose, Moses, so I can go on and die' (320).

Her discourse is the utterance of a divided-self, -- Miriam, the prophetess, and Miriam, the leper -- and it can be called, thus, a double discourse. Her repression and fears are described in a language that has internalized its own powerlessness. The imagery in which she perceives and describes herself is very pertinent here. She is just " 'a grain of sand,' " which defines her ontological inferiority vis-à-vis the " 'mountain.' " It is a language that traps her within the prison that her body has become. Nonetheless, it is also a language that gives voice to a muted rebellion, a veiled accusation of brain washing, of psychological torture, of having been locked up inside her body, the worst form of human alienation. Miriam can no longer be silent about

the crucial reason for her past insubordination: " 'When I found out I couldn't do no more in Israel than you let me ...' " (321). Her words carry, therefore, the curious ambiguity of being deferential in tone, and accusing in intent. Only in her last address is she straightforward and speaks her mind. Sensing that Moses, as usual, is trying to evade the issue that brought her to face him, Miriam's words sparkle with her old determination and pride -- a language that sounds liberating and powerful:

> 'No, Moses, don't put me off like that. Talk to me straight. I come here to you for something and I don't mean to go till you tell me yes or no. I don't mean to leave here until I get what I come after' (322).

Curiously, enough, the duplicity of Miriam's discourse is paralleled in the narrative's point of view which is, at this point, conspicuously judgmental in relation to Miriam, as if it were captive of Moses' point of view: "The repulsive old woman was tragic. She had been sent on a mission as he had been sent, and the burden had torn and twisted her. She had been petty, envious and mean, but she had served" (322). But then, it also presents a capsuled statement that underscores Miriam's valor, and, consequently, weakens such a captivity [or complicity?]: "Miriam had lived on hopes where other women lived on memories." It is as if the narrator is playing it both ways, and Hurston, the author, wrestling with a point of view that reproduces the subjection/ resistance relation of the character's discourse on the level of the narration. Perhaps, this fact is the most important evidence of Hurston's presence as a female author impinging upon [and resisting] the point of view of her own fictional design, a design that does not alter, in a radical fashion, the traditional nature of Moses' story. Moses is the hero of the novel. Its final descriptive paragraph, cogent with the structural demand of the story, conveys a divinization of his power. Moses

is at the mountain peak, deploying his rod and commanding the Universe, an embodiment of phallic power aiming at the heights of a transcendental and everlasting existence.

This conventional ending, that almost seem to invite a tongue-in-cheek reading because of the overemphasized 'uplifting' quality of its imagery is, yet, consonant with the written sacred tradition of the Hebrews, the legitimacy of which was, certainly, not the novel's intent to question. However, for the reader engaged in a critical reading of Moses' character, it is quite impossible to dispell the impression that Moses is lesser a hero than the final description conveys, an impression that depends largely upon the narrator's interference. For example, immediately upon Miriam's death, the narrator tells us:

> Moses called a halt and told the people what it meant to lose a patriot like Miriam. The young ones were told what the old ones had forgotten - all about those days back in Egypt when the house of the prophetess Miriam was the meeting place of all those who were willing to work for freedom. How she had gathered folks together by twos and threes and changed weakness into resolution. Her dust weighed as much as all Israel. The people all listened and thought it was a great speech. They even mourned when Moses ordered them to mourn for thirty days. They held a great crying for Miriam. So Moses buried her with a big ceremony and ordered a great tomb of rocks to be piled up over her grave.

These lines elicit the reader's outrage at Moses' hypocritical politics. Miriam is only acknowledged in her absence, an absence that renders him more powerful than ever. She is practically converted into a script for his own edification, which lays bare the reason for his hostility towards her insistence in naming herself. The passage, for the reader, becomes tinged with irony, because the reader knows too well how Moses dealt with Miriam throughout the novel. His treatment of her mocks his own words, once proferred to the Pharaoh: " '... justice is greater than pride' " (206). Only two pages

before the end, the narrator demystifies his god-like status: " ... he had made his mistakes and had his regrets. But every heart has its graveyard" (347). The signs of Moses' fallibility, either explicit in the text or accrued after a close reading, tarnish the apocalyptic vision of his glory, as if they constitute an ironic final comment of an authorial presence unsure of how fully she subscribes to the material she is handling.

In short, Moses, Man of the Mountain is a curious and complex novel in which Hurston skillfully weaves the literary inheritance of Judeo-Christian tradition with the product of her own imagination and insight into the subject. The story of Moses is not edited to the point of subverting its original meaning but it is, indeed, impressed with a point of view that struggles, erratically, with the cultural givens and the devaluation of woman. The symbolic significance of gender-markings shaping [and denying] woman's access to power -- woman as an active subject in the process of decision-making by which a group fights oppression and organizes itself to assert its own physical and cultural independence -- lifts the novel from its mythic framework and bestows upon it a dimension of meaning extremely relevant to the modern reader who is trying to understand the reason why, besides the obvious racial identification, Hurston appropriated a story from the far past and inserted in it a character like Miriam who, as inserted into the novel, is absent in the original text and, primarily, does not have anything to do with the race question or a racial point of view.

In its broad outlook, the novel deals with the history of human oppression -- of power and powerlessness -- that is transhistorical and, essentially, unchanging, as Hurston's racial metaphor intends to point out. Yet, it is crucial to note that the novel suggests a further qualification of oppression: while colonization [the enslavement of a race, of a people], and sexism can be equated as similar forms of oppression, they are also distinct phenomena of domination because the latter is

an ever-present fact in social life that cuts across race and class lines and surfaces, even more strongly, within the group engaged in its own liberation. It is as if in a period of social upheaval and national consolidation, there were a more urgent necessity to reduce woman to a social appendage. In this way, the novel suggests that woman's powerlessness is not a natural, but a social and political fact, shaped by the sexual politics of a hierarchical society controlled by the patriarchy. Specifically, Moses evokes the fact that, with the consolidation of the social system of patriarchy among the Hebrews, legitimized by a monotheist patriarchal religion, woman's place was more rigidly defined in terms of the domestic 'natural' role; therein lies the roots of woman's status in the western world.

The opening and closing paragraphs of the novel vividly illustrate the sexual polarity that informs its content. While woman's procreative powers, centered in the womb, can be regarded as a function of nature, man's rod, with which he controls nature, forges a nation, consolidates his masculine power and, places him in the realm of culture.[12] Moses constructs a society while woman is established as the object upon which he imprints his prestige as male, and exercises his power. For a woman such as Miriam, who distances herself from the normative female role, there is no mercy. She stands in an unsanctioned zone, is potentially a threat to the patriarchy and must, necessarily, be suppressed. A reflection upon this content, leads us to an understanding of how woman has come to be what she is -- powerless, devalued, with a personality subject to distortions -- but also of how she has manipulated language to speak up of her rebellion, even if it brought her doom.

Finally, considering what Hurston did in Moses and her position as a black female author writing, at the time, a kind of fiction that did not conform with the 'official language' of black protest fiction produced in the 30's and 40's, the reader is faced with lingering and thorny questions that intimate the symbolic

significance of the novel: Isn't Miriam a projection of what Hurston experienced in terms of her identity as a female author, vis-à-vis the other contemporary black writers?[13] Didn't she see herself as the doomed prophet of her race, with no supportive community, especially for providing honest critical attention to her works, but stubborn enough to pursue her priorities as a writer and her right to autonomy of self-expression?

Seraph on the Suwanee[14] is a novel that concerns itself with white life; a subject matter untapped before by Hurston. It suggests the long way travelled by Hurston since the early days of the Renaissance when black writers, motivated by the racial politics of the moment but also inhibited by publishing constraints, did not venture into an area that, most certainly, would place them in an uneasy relationship with the white audience. James Weldon Johnson in his article "The Dilemma of the Negro Author," addressed with objectivity the problem faced, then, by the Negro writer:

> White America has a strong feeling that Negro artists should refrain from making use of white subject matter. I mean by that, subject matter which it feels belongs to the white world. In plain words, white America does not welcome seeing the Negro competing with the white man on what it considers the white man's own ground.[15]

The 40's witnessed a new era in American race relations that was bound to cause an impact in the literature produced by blacks. According to Robert A. Bone there was a visible trend among postwar novelists that sought to expand the range of Negro experience with a fiction that, responding to the advances in the field of civil rights brought on by the war and its aftermath, groped towards an integrationist society.[16] Hugh M. Gloster appraised this trend as a "gradual emancipation of the Negro writer from the fetters of racial chauvinism and cultural isolation."[17]

Apart from this contextual background that must

have had a bearing upon Hurston's choice, the novel itself can be linked to, or even seen as an outgrowth of her journalistic activities between 1942 and 1945, when, as Robert Hemenway points out, she published several articles that posited a favorable attitude towards a pluralist society.[18] In fact, two years after the novel was issued, Hurston published an article, "What White Publishers Won't Print," where she makes a statement that sounds both like a justification and a validation of her efforts as a fiction writer: "But for the national welfare, it is urgent to realize that the minorities do think, and think about something other than the race question."[19]

In general terms, the novel evinces Hurston's closeness to the rural South. Leaving the context of Negro folk culture behind, Hurston let emerge her profound knowledge and sensitivity to the broader aspects of the southern experience in the depiction of a fundamentalist white cracker family set in the turpentine town of Sawley, in northern Florida. The historical and sociological delineation of the region's profile in the period between 1900 and 1930 coalesces in the economic changes, stratification and urban development that transform the region, giving origins to what has been conventionally called the New South.[20] Against this picture of a changing South where the dialectics of the Old and the New engenders complex class and race relations within a system characterized by a racist patriarchalism, Hurston probes the psychological struggles of a poor white woman whose ability to redefine her identity for herself is decisively arrested by family conditioning, during her childhood, and by the sexual politics of male dominance that structure and define the bourgeois marriage.

In the characterization of Arvay Henson, the youngest of two daughters of a turpentine worker and farm family, Hurston imprints the cultural identity of the southern cracker as if to say that whites, like blacks, do also have a distinct recognizable identity. In this identity

converge: the poor socio-economic background, partly responsible for a low-self image; the blind adherence to the traditional notion of white superiority; a deterministic view of the world fostered by the hell-ridden notion that pervades the fundamentalist faith; and the view of woman as a self-abnegating being that fulfills the protestant tradition of woman's inferiority vis-à-vis the reasoning male. The interwining of these aspects with the specifics of personality formation provide the psychological underpinnings of Arvay's identity. Hurston's acute insight into Arvay's development shows how a woman's consciousness is shaped by the character of the social reality and how it becomes, ultimately, a site of psychic structures of patriarchy.

The plot of the novel is rather simple, and develops in a straightforward fashion. The story, though told in the third person point of view, is filtered, largely, through Arvay's consciousness. The closeness between narrator and character is such that it reaches the point where their identities become indistinguishable. At sixteen, Arvay Henson surprises the family with the announcement that she is through with the world and intends to devote her life to missionary work. Her decision is made after Carl Middleton, the pastor of the local Baptist church who had shown interest in Arvay herself, marries her sister. Undernourished emotionally and intellectually because of the general preference for her sister who was "pretty in the ways that the rural community favored" (5), and growing up under the strict authority of an unfeeling father, Arvay had become an object of amusement to the Sawley people who "had no way of knowing that Arvay was timid from feeling unsafe inside" (8). Her frustrations had been temporarily dispelled when Carl had made her feel "wanted and warm and secure and important to someone for awhile" (11). His deceptive maneuver, however, throws Arvay into the pits of despair. She reacts to the loss of warmth and sensual exhilaration in a most negative manner. Not only does she renounce the world, convinced that "God had denied

her the fate of sharing in the common happiness and joys of the world" (9), but she also retreats further into herself where she secretly entertains romantic fantasies with her sister's husband, fantasies that, in reality, disguise sexual feelings. When such fantasies are assaulted by the reality of her sister's pregnancy, Arvay begins to experience her emergent sexuality as something threatening and alien which her religious education does not fail to associate with a satanic energy. Her alienation from people and from herself [her body], is accentuated by her total involvement with religion, in the light of which she comforts herself and gets ready to accept her share of suffering for she believes it is "the duty of man to suffer in this world" (64). Outside the area of her conscious immersion in religion, from which she derives a palliative feeling and on the subliminal level, Arvay responds to her frustrations through hysteric seizures which become a manifestation of her repressed sexuality at the same time that they disclose a pattern of self-imposed denial. She is invariably given to these hysterical displays when young suitors accompany her home after church service. Her self-denial is, no doubt, the result of a body-negating ethic inculcated into her by a male ideology which, validated by a patriarchal religion, poses female sexuality as anathema to the feminine role. Furthermore, it is important to observe that Arvay's attitude and behavior, such as her meek disposition, her religiousness and her seizures, reproduce a phase of her mother's adolescence, a fact that not only evinces the mother-daughter bond but also underscores their identity as female. It is an identity that is labelled 'queer' by the rural folks. If, on the one hand, this term defines Arvay as hysterical, on the other, it intimates the psychological process of adaptation that obviates woman's emotional integrity and libidinal needs and prepares her to accept her inferior status in a world dominated by men.

Arvay's isolation ends when Jim Meserve, a handsome and bold Yankee entrepeneur, disregards her fits and

imposes himself as a serious pretender. Attracted to Jim but also driven to accept him by an authoritative father and an anxious mother who acts like "two glad dogs in a meat-house" (13) in their eagerness to marry her off, Arvay struggles with ambivalent feelings. For her, Jim is an answer to her wish to be "safely married" (42); he is a "first-class" man and represents a refuge from her loveless life of ignorance and poverty. However, she believes she is unworthy of him, both because of her background and her guilt over her mental adultery with her sister's husband. In addition to that, Arvay is assailed by a two-fold fear: the fear of losing him, especially, to Lorraine (37) and a fear she cannot quite understand but which is related to her apprehension about personal fulfillment: "if she married Jim Meserve, her whole duty as a wife was to just love him good, be nice and kind around the house and have children for him. She could do that and be more than happy and satisfied, but it looked too simple" (33). Arvay becomes an embattled self swinging between what is socially desirable and the conflicts of a personally-felt reality.

Their actual marriage is preceded by a rape episode that foreshadows their sexual roles and the turbulent quality of their relationship -- a relationship vitiated by Arvay's passivity, a "play-pretty" object, and Jim's entrapment in a masculine sense of superiority crystallized in his idea of woman's 'protector.' When Arvay gives birth to a mentally retarded son, she regards him as a punishment. To her guilt over her adolescent sexual dreams is added the guilt over Earl's handicap. Overprotecting, thus, the child that Jim openly rejects, and antagonizing the latter as well as the world around her, become Arvay's way of life, a form of self-inflicted punishment for her growing obsessive guilt.

Even when they move to the fruit-growing area of Citrabelle where Jim succeeds as a prosperous grower by sheer luck and ambition, their relationship does not get anywhere: "They fumbled and searched for each other in darkness" (68). Uneasy with their material progress,

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an "outside show of ownership" (204), Arvay remains indifferent to Jim's efforts to give her a high-class living style. Her inferiority complex resurfaces and damages her relationship with their other two normal children, Angeline and Kenny. They are authentic Meserves whereas she will be always a Henson, a cracker. Her class perceptions unfold her race prejudices. She shows a strong bias against the Corregio's, a Portuguese family of hired help, who she defines as foreigners, non-white barbarians. Her perceptions stem, in fact, from her own intimidation and insecurity, feelings that, at the bottom, are linked to her resentment both of Jim's power over her--- a power that makes her feel like a slave (119) -- and of her own submisson to a pleasurable suffering that renders her "passive, passive, receptive and dream-like" (137). In his turn, Jim cannot understand the complexities underlying Arvay's unhappiness. He abuses her naiveté, plays mean tricks on her and, unrelentingly, asserts his male power by pointing out her dependency: "What would become of the poor weak thing without the proper person to give her the right care?"(93).

The relative and apparent calm of their family life is broken when Earl sexually attacks the Corregio's girl. He hides in the swamp near his home and is, later, killed by a posse at the moment he tries to shoot Jim, who had been trying to convince him to surrender. Although Arvay feels that part of her eighteen - year - burden is lifted (137), she is helpless to cope with the emotional conflict that attend the fragmentation of her self. She struggles hard to understand who she is and questions the meaning of love. The children are grown, Jim is often absent on his shrimp-business trips, and she who had been "patterned to serve" (213) finds herself empty-handed, a human waste. Arvay's withdrawal, which verges on a psychologically distraught behavior, is misunderstood by Jim who expects her to show recognition for everything he did for her benefit (232). Unable to stand her passivity he walks out on her and warns: she "must make the first move" if their marriage is to be resumed.

After Arvay's return to Sawley for her mother's death and funeral, during which she confronts the past and the crude reality of her background, she is freed of her frustrations and emerges with some self-confidence and a sense of humanity. On joining Jim on the coast, she attains the kind of peace that stems from someone completely enraptured with the comforts of mothering. Jim is as dominant as ever: " 'You're going to do just what I say do...' " (308), but Arvay, deceptively, makes of her powerlessness her triumph. She perceives him as "a little boy who had fled in out of the dark to the comfort of his mother" (308). Her job is to respond to Jim's expectations -- to sooth and serve him, a role which she, characteristically, places in the context of the mariological tradition of femininity: "Holy Mary, who had been blessed to mother Jesus had been no better off than she was" (311). Arvay's new beginning, though vested in an imagery that suggests rebirth discloses, in reality, her entrapment in a marriage, where the only way she can experience her womanhood is through an ideal-ization of her own domesticity, an idealization that mystifies reality and prevents her from developing con-sciousness of her own oppression. At the end, she epito-mizes the feminine ideal that combines elements of the angel and the slave: "She was serving and meant to serve" (311). No doubt that the husband's name [Jim Me-serve] and the novel's title [Seraph on the Suwanee][21] were cleverly named by Hurston.

If, on the one hand, the novel's outcome is an unsatisfactory one because it conveys Arvay's final surrender to a supportive role that flattens out the psychological complexity and struggles she bears as a character throughout the novel, it is important, on the other hand, to regard it not as a measure of Hurston's failure to develop the potentialities enclosed in Arvay's character but as the climax in the development of a design that exposes the slow and pervasive process by which a woman's identity is shaped so that she can be a more fit companion to her husband. This 'educative'

process to which Arvay as female is subjected combined with a socio-familial reality that has marginalized Arvay as a person, foster the self-denial, passivity and inferiority complex that incapacitate Arvay to face the circumscribing world of her marriage and the nature of her relationship with Jim. In the end, she offers herself to Jim for approval, receiving, in return, the material security and emotional comfort she needs. Along these lines, Seraph on the Suwanee discloses Arvay's failure to evolve a personal criteria of self-worth, a failure that is a direct outgrowth of the familial, social and economic pressures that, throughout her life, affect her discernment and her perceptions of herself.

The roots of Arvay's defeat, undoubtedly lie in her background, in the interweaving of socio-economic, cultural and familial factors that foster the sociological and psychological tangle to which Arvay's self-concept is strapped. Internalizing the conditions that have made her a poor, rejected and emotionally disturbed girl, Arvay responds to her narrow world with fear, guilt and lack of self-confidence, a response that lays out the psychological basis for her oppression: she becomes susceptible to the misleading notion of marriage as a refuge and is ill-equipped to resist the power relations that her self-reliant domineering husband sets up as the regulating principle of their relationship. Arvay's marriage to Jim Meserve is the culmination of the deeply entrenched process that arrests her identity, once for all, in the prison of sexual role. In the confines of this prison, her potentiality for growth is thrown in jeopardy and her shortcomings, such as her lack of insight, her low self-esteem and her inability to validate what her inmost self rebels against, reach a fearful degree.

As early as during their courtship, Jim's actions are directed to domesticating the young Arvay into passivity, the quintessence of the female role. Subscribing to the traditional patriarchal view of woman as brainless and helpless creatures who " 'were not given to thinking'"

but " 'were made to hover and to feel' " (93). Jim is over-zealous in defining his role, which casts Arvay into a permanent state of tutelage: " 'You need my help and my protection...' " (15); " 'I'll be around to look for you and point out things;' " " 'I know how to handle you' " (16). His statements become an effective indoctrinating tool that leads Arvay to accept his words as if she were "coming through religion" (24). Secure in his power over her, Jim does not hesitate to hold up to her, rather chauvinistically, his model of womanhood: " 'Lady folks were just made to laugh and act loving and kind and have a good man to do for them all he's able, and have him as many boy-children as he figgers he'd like to have...' " (23). Such a model reinforces a pattern of behavior that induces Arvay to respond to his manly bearing in exactly the way be expects her. Thus, when he puts an end to Arvay's seizure by dropping turpentine in her eye, he authoritatively declares to her father: " 'A woman knows who her master is all right, and she answers to his commands' " (31). It is in the rape episode, however, that he indulges in his desire to assert his mastery, living up to his notion that " 'Women folks don't have no mind to make up nohow' " (23) and following, blindly, Joe Kelsey's advice:

> 'Most women folks will love you plenty if you take and see to it that they do. Make 'em knuckle under. From the very first jump, get the bridle in they mouth and ride 'em hard and stop 'em short. They's all alike, Boss. Take 'em and break 'em' (41).

The presence of a black man motivating a white man to action is important here, because it points to a reversal of what is systematically shown in Hurston's other works, that is, the black man acting under the effects of white racism or emulating the patterns of white manhood. Kelsey's attitude, no doubt, says something about Hurston's perceptions of the black man. He is not only Jim's black friend, a turpentine woodsman who, later, becomes his handy-man and partner. He is also depicted as an ally

with the white man in the debasement of woman, a fact that, in itself, invites a most caustic response of the reader to his freewheeling nature, and constitutes Hurston's most unbiased indictment of sexism.

Arvay's response to Jim's advances is imagistically captured in the description of herself in front of the mirror, moments before she goes down to greet him in the parlor. The mirror image intimates the other that she will become: "her eyes stretched wide in fear like a colt that has been saddled for the first time" (13). In social terms, Jim's company nourishes her ego because he makes her feel like "some precious play-pretty" (18) who belongs to "something" and, consequently, stirs the jealousie of single women and courting girls. Yet, there is a part of her that resists his impertinence and the way he treats her. She openly discourages him, protests against his intrusion, has bursts of rage, clenches her teeth, and even, slaps his face. Defiant in her "childlike pathetic voice" (14), Arvay inwardly fears him: he is made "out of flesh" and acts " 'like the Devil' " (17). Jim acknowledges his nature and, teasingly, tells her his right name " 'Peter Ripsaw, the Devil's high sheriff and son in law.' "

Arvay's sense of a "fearful future lying in ambush for her" (33) is materialized when Jim rapes her under the mulberry tree, the "green temple of peace" of her childhood, only a few hours before both get legally married. If, on the one hand, the scene illustrates the exercise of manly power and physical aggresiveness to subdue a woman's will, on the other, it dramatizes the extent to which a woman, besieged by the fears fostered by her own helplessness vis-à-vis man's actions and the social world, always ready to judge her, surrenders her selfhood and becomes, unwittingly, the willing partner in her own oppression. The religious overtones of her discomfitting sexual experience conveys Arvay's incapacity to grasp the events as a violation of her body and her psyche.

The rape evokes in Arvay feelings associated to

her past: her deceit, guilt, inadequacy, and her fear of being left in the lurch. She fights Jim but her timid resistence is overcome by his fierce strength. When she deems that Jim will not leave her, her fear is sublimated into acceptance and her guilt exorcised in a second intercourse which she experiences as "a great act of mercy" (47), a mixture of drunkenness and impotence that aproaches the orgasmic experience of religion. She "must eat him up, and absorb him within herself" (48) an urge dictated by her vicarious identification with the man who enjoys her. This submission to a pleasurable suffering that fits Arvay's religious bent, renders her psychologically handicapped to understand that her experience walls her sexuality away from her own domain, and shatters her fragile selfhood beyond restoration. Of course, she wins Jim's favorable appraisal: " 'You are a wonderful woman, Arvay' " (51). In his mind, Jim does not see any difference between marriage and rape. He warns her: " 'Sure you was raped, and that ain't all. You're goint to keep on getting raped' " (50). Under Jim's spell, Arvay, though bewildered, is compelled to view the episode as an accomplished fact from which there is no escape. She promptly translates it into religious terms, placing her rape in the context of a self-sacrifice that redeems her past sins and sets her soul free. The distorted nature of her perceptions and her self-deception that, actually, blurs the true meaning of the event, can be apprehended by the reader when juxtaposed to the narrator's telling description of Jim after their sexual encounter: "He was growling like a tigger which had just made a kill..." (48).

Their married life plays out, with variations, the notes of this gloomy overture. Arvay is tossed in the grips of the patriarchal family structure which, having its economic and social bases in male supremacy, foists upon her a passive, home-oriented life that not only reduces her into an agent to the needs of the family, but also turns her into Jim's property. Arvay has internalized so well the social conditioning that she

drowns in her role and is not even aware of what question to ask in order to liberate herself from her overwhelming sense of obligation and dependence. Her drowning in what she accepts as natural stifles her self-consciousness and prevents her to see herself as a woman exposed to danger.

Jim's disconnection with home in his efforts to rise economically as an independent grower is accentuated with the birth of Earl, whose existence he barely acknowledges. Evidently, the child's appearance is not flattering to his self-image nor conforms to his expectations regarding his "boy-child." Around Earl, Arvay constructs a protective wall, becoming, thus, a full-time nurturer who shuts herself off in a destructive world of self-contemplation. The syndrome of guilt over Earl's abnormality recrusdeces her feelings of unworthiness and inferiority which substantiate her belief in her otherness, while Jim appears to her eyes as a god-like figure, a "great and perfect man" (101), "this miracle of a man" who "had married her;" "a miracle right out of the Bible" (147). Such a vulnerability vis-à-vis Jim's stalwart strength and self-confidence is constantly reinforced by Jim's paternalist attitude, an attitude that keeps Arvay shackled to a child-like existence. His names of endearment, "play-pretty," "baby-child," "weak-thing" and "little-bits" belittle her as a person and functions as a foil to his pride, " 'You got a man...' " (65) With the assurance that she is safely under his protection, Arvay is indulged and relieved of the responsibility to think and act maturely, which makes the false come true, that is, her shortcomings become themselves, the rationale for Jim's brandishing superiority. This situation is no better illustrated that when Arvay undergoes miserable suffering during her third pregnancy for fear of giving birth to a girl after Jim had made her promise it would be a boy and had, playfully but convincingly enough, threatened to leave her if otherwise. Arvay's failure to discern what had been meant as a joke is not surprising considering that it corresponds exactly to

how she has been perceived and treated by Jim -- as a naive and innocent simple - minded woman. By being deferential and by blaming Arvay's failure on her womanhood (93) Jim perpetuates the vicious circle that conditions Arvay to dwell on her own inadequacy and lack of common sense.

Arvay's destitution as a person is significantly conveyed in her emotional surrender to the female stereotype which, ultimately, becomes a deterrent to her humanity. She cannot bring herself to look critically into the conditions that render her so helpless in relation to the family. Wallowing in narcissist contemplation, she let her motherhood bleed. With Earl gone, and Angeline and Kenny growing up and doing what they please, with Jim's approval, [Angeline elopes at seventeen to marry a young northerner and Kenny goes to college and then, leaves to becomes a jazz mucisian], Arvay feels her world crumbling, "a crack in the wall of home" (152) that touches a deep-seated aspect of her personality, "She had never been counted or necessary" (174). This extrapolation that stems from her lack of power-decision and participation in the family affairs, feeds on the pervasive lingering knowledge that Jim had never taken her for his equal which,inevitably, consolidates her view of the world that classifies him as the master "of the great plantations" and herself as "the backwoods Cracker" (115), "who had found favor in the master's sight" (174).

In view of such a positioning, Arvay's prejudices against the hired help, the Kelseys [a black family] and the Corregios [Portuguese immigrants] whose presence she comes to regard as an obstacle between herself and her family, must be considered as a natural development within the context of a system that on the sexual, racial, social and cultural levels, conditions societal attitudes and mores to foster divisions, so instrumental in keeping people apart. As a product of this system, Arvay cannot be aware of the fact that in accepting, blindly, the premise of inferiority of a race and of a

nationality, she is herself deprived of the knowledge that would help her to focus and to understand her own debasement both as a personal and political question, and so, reach a wider view of racism and sexism as a two-fold aspect of the same mechanism -- the mechanism of a white male-oriented society designed to supress blacks and women and reduce them into artificial social categories. As it is, Arvay is imprisoned within the circle of the self, just as the traditional mother and wife under her circumstances is, which prevents her from reaching levels of identification with other human beings also being oppressed and robbed of their human worth.

Clearly, Arvay's dehumanized and static view of the people around her [even her daughter's husband was first seen as a " 'Yankee scamp, a dirty Carpet-bagger,' " (156)] mirrors the alienation of her senses, the impoverishment of her sensibility in relation to the real world. She is too driven to link her dissatisfaction and spiritual anxiety to the concrete alienating experience of her marriage. The absence of such a connection creates a gap that makes reality imperceptible: it is camouflaged under the trappings of the economic advantages that marriage has granted her and which seem to sooth her. This is all too well illustrated when Arvay takes up her place in the "throne room," the newly furnished porch added to the house, which she had always regarded as a status-symbol "of a class of folks whom she thought of as too high-toned for her to compare with" (204).

Uncomfortable, at first, with the novelty, Arvay at last gives herself entirely to the new experience:

> The porch belonged to her after that. She had noted a difference in Mrs Howland's manner with her, she thought. She took to inviting other women friends to drop in and they all expressed envy of her porch. It built Arvay up and made her feel more inside of things. It was a kind of throne room, and out there, Arvay felt that she could measure arms and cope. Just looking around her gave her courage (205).

As the narrator faithfully describes, the porch gives her confidence and a sense of security that puts Arvay more at ease with her social position. Huddling in it as if in a refuge, she feels encouraged to pursue more contact with people. In reality, however, the porch is the pedestal that Jim offers to the fairy tale princess "with your long, soft golden hair" (231); a pedestal that gives her an illusory sense of humanity because it is a sign of stratification and affluence that sharpens social and economic differences, and, therefore, prevents her from interacting with others on a truly human basis. Arvay Meserve, here, is the embodiment of the bourgeois ideal of the helpless white woman of leisured society. The fact that she assumes a position that Janie Crawford rejected in Their Eyes Were Watching God, discloses the most pronounced difference between a white woman's and a black woman's way of looking at their worlds: their sense of values in relation to the social and economic contexts of capitalist society and their way of coping with a marriage that threatens to engulf them in a world of appearances and insubstantial well-being. The contrast between Arvay and Janie, actually highlights the black woman's more perceptive grasp of the clothing by which oppression is disguised, and her courage to reject what the majority has, traditionally, projected as the ideal place to which woman should aspire.

If Arvay fails to penetrate beyond the surface appearances of a marriage that has given her a comfortable, doll-like existente but that has, concomitantly, widened her distance from a full-human stature, the reader is likely not to follow along the same path. Although Hurston leaves interpretation of the male-female relationship and its underlying realities to the reader, there are attitudes and positions that capacitate her/him to question and, thus, define Arvay's discontent and its reasons. It is true that Arvay carries her low-self esteem and her sexual conditioning as female into the marriage with Jim Meserves. But it is the kind of marriage she enters into that, decisively, shatters with

the possibility of uprooting and overcoming her conditioning, though Jim's apparent generosity and support seem to work towards that end. The fact is that, at the bottom-line, their relationship is marked by oppressive power relations that disparage equality and, systematically, prey upon Arvay's encrusted shortcomings to lead her to internalize a slave-status. Jim's patriarchal authority coexists with the brash ruthlessness of the rising bourgeois type who translates the relations of domination that perpetuate the dichotomy of a class-society, into the discourse of intimacy: " 'Love and marry me and sleep with me. That is all I need you for. Your brains are not sufficient to help me with my work; you can't think with me ...' " (32). As an ambitious entrepeneur who envisions a bright future of material success in the period of transformations that sweep the New South in the 20's and 30's, Jim acts consistently within the bourgeois marriage ethics that centers manhood dignity on his capacity to fulfill the role of breadwinner and economic provider, while woman's humanity is measured in terms of female characteristics of passivity, delicacy and lack of brains. Witness this exchange:

> 'Come pay-day, leave your pretty wife sit on her front porch and look down the road and say with a smile, 'Well here come my husband and them.'
> 'Them what' Arvay asked.
> 'Them dollars, fool. Let him be man enough to bring it when he comes' (159).

Jim's attitude expresses a contradiction that characterizes the bourgeois economic reality on the level of male-female relationships: the idealization of femininity and the relegation of woman, as a person, to an inferior category. Arvay must perform the only function she has been designed to perform: to fulfill Jim's emotional and sexual needs; to be a receptacle for his urge to master and for his unbriddled desire to feel his manhood. It is evident that he never sees her as a person. She is a

female, and as such, she must be owned and possessed, in body and soul. She must be dehumanized to serve him, the complete all-knowing human-being.

The most central feature of Arvay's dehumanization is the appropriation of her sexuality. When Jim rapes her, he actually shapes her sexual response into a passive reaction and recognition of his control over their sexual relationships. It is an experience that curtails mutuality and steers Arvay away from responding to sex apart from the framework of male domination. On equating rape with marriage Jim condemns her to be daily ravished, to be an instrument of pleasure, which is equivalent to saying that, throughout their married life, Arvay is destined to experience sexuality as the most intimate form of alienation.

Making love has, for Arvay, the overwhelming quality of a religious experience that leaves her exalted, in ecstatic delight, but also renders her helpless and yielding to a strange power that encloses her, makes her captive and, which, she resents. She strives hard to understand why she succumbs to Jim, who always leaves her so out of touch with herself: "God, please have mercy on her poor soul, but she was a slave to that man! How? Why? Those were answers that were hidden away from her poor knowledge" (119). Experiencing, thus, her sexuality as a form of compulsion, Arvay is torn between compellment and hatred, shame and delight, resistence and passivity. Repression manifests itself in the absence of spontaneous self-expression, in the sexual submission of her body, in the dissociation between sexual pleasure and tender feelings, which undercuts participation and the sense of a shared experience, both as a sexual and social human being. Arvay's alienated sexuality determines a negative response to her own self: "Arvay hated herself, because for the life of her, she could not move away from Jim..." (137). It is a self that is fragmented "Arvay departed from herself," foreign and frightening: "What kind of Devil am I? (...) That man's got me so that I'm just about as near nothing as anybody could be"

(138). Arvay cannot ever look back at herself except through her invisibility in relation to "the man" and this invisibility retains the paralyzing force that destroys from within: her whole identity is held at bay. No wonder that both in the private and social spheres she feels uncomfortable, ill at ease and even anguished, as if she were constantly being evaluated by outside elements.

The dispossession of Arvay's sexuality is given a dramatic texture by the symbolic quality vested in the 'Big Swamp,' the stretch of muck that flanks the west-side of Jim's property. The swamp is a symbol of Arvay's drives and libidinal needs, which she never had a chance of incorporating into her internal space as a vital aspect of her humanity, because both family conditioning and religious education taught her to associate them with evil, which must necessarily be repressed. Marriage brings her into awareness of sexuality but only as a response to the power-oriented act of male appropriation -- it has been enclosed and become part of Jim's property. Arvay's psycho-sexual reality is symbolically reflected in the violation of the swamp, that retreats "before the magic of man" (170). The last sanctuary of the wilderness is ravaged mercilessly by the machines and trucks, symbol of man's desire to master and of an economic order that seeks to transform the "useless" land into capital and profit. The association between sexuality and the wilderness, woman's dispossession and the conquest of nature, oppression and male capitalism converge forcefully in an image that holds both a personal and social symbolic significance. Arvay's feeling of loss, of lonesomeness as she watches the destruction of the swamp, intimates her own predicament: "This Howland Development seemed infinitely more threatening to her than the dark gloom of the swamp had been. It was ever so personal to her, so she kept her vigil on the porch, keeping track of every new change out there" (172).

It is in the two bedroom scenes in the second half of the novel that Hurston exposes the most degrading

stage of Arvay's dehumanization. The bedroom becomes a synonym for entrapment where Arvay is dramatically situated within the most intimate limits of a woman's place and defers to the sexual role that renders her a slave "patterned to serve." Like Lucy Pearson, of Jonah's Gourd Vine, Arvay has experienced the devastating effects of a servile love in terms that recur throughout Hurston's works, and that suggest their common female condition: "Her love had mounted her to the tops of peaky mountains. It had dragged her in the dust. She had been in Hell's kitchen and licked out all the pots" (153). But unlike Lucy and the other black women such as Delia Jones and Janie Crawford in whose bedroom begins the journey towards liberation from subservience, Arvay cannot break through her conditioned response to Jim's chauvinist authority and her brief instants of resistence are vitiated by a misconception of love as a self-sacrifice, a misconception that Jim's aggressive possessiveness has helped to consolidate.

The first scene takes place after Arvay and Jim come back home from a social gathering at Kenny's university. Exasperated with Arvay's nagging discontent and uneasiness in such strange surroundings, Jim drives her home and confronts her in the bedroom. He looks down on her "as if she were a chair" (188), and orders her to strip. When she tries to cover herself, he bellows: " 'Don't you move!' " " 'You're my damn property, and I want you right where you are, and I want you naked. Stand right there in your tracks until I tell you that you can move' " (190). While his harsh voice commands her, repeatedly, to keep hugging and kissing him, he stretches full-length upon her "but in the same way that he might have laid himself down on a couch. The particular cruelty that underlines Arvay's physical debasement is almost overshadowed by her pathetic eagerness to please him. She acquisces to his orders so that she hopes to escape the "bondage" that throws her "in a burning hell" (191). Her only outburst of rebellion is suppressed by Jim's caresses. He, then, snuggles in her breast

"in that way he had that Arvay thought was so much like a helpless child, and went off into peaceful sleep" (192). At this juncture, the conspicuous aspect of Jim's tyranny emerges into full view. Arvay is encased in a symbiotic whore-mother role apart from which she cannot be. Her futile struggle for selfhood subsides behind "the calm Buddha mask." On assuming a fictitions self, even her desire to die seem hilariously irrelevant for she must not relinquish the "vibrant life" of someone who is in love. Despite the misleading statements of a narrator who does not have, at this point, a voice apart from Arvay's thoughts, the reader cannot but apprehend the irony between Arvay's notion of a "vibrant life" and the actual process of self-effacement that the scene depicts. Arvay's attitude echoes the experience of another of Hurston's female character, Missie May of "The Golden Six-Bits" whose wish to die to escape from male oppression is sublimated into another form of self-sacrifice: to serve.

The second bedroom scene follows the dramatic moment of the novel when Jim captures an eight-foot rattlesnake and, despite knowing of Arvay's fear of reptiles, calls her outside to admire his display of manhood strength. Unexpectedly, the snake's lower-half wraps around his waist, threatening his life. Jim, in agonizing pain, calls Arvay for help, but she sees everything as "through a casing of glass." Her fragmented self is reflected by her reaction to the external event: "In her consciousness Arvay flew to Jim and slew that snake and held Jim in her arms like a baby. Actually, Arvay never moved. She could neither run to the rescue nor flee away from the sight of what she feared would happen" (223). Jim, who is finally saved by Jeff Kelsey, his black overseer, cannot understand the complex nature of Arvay's immobility and later, in the bedroom, he charges her of female cowardice, of failing the test that would make her "a great woman."[22]

The significance of this scene lies in what is disclosed through their verbal exchange: the frustrations

and grudges that attend the sexual politics within a coersive marriage structure. For Jim, Arvay's worth is measured in terms of her positive response to his expectations. Since she failed to act when he needed her, but, most important of all, failed to grasp the underlying meaning of his gesture, [gesture that clearly implies a male ritualization of his sexual role], Arvay must be scourged as a person and repudiated as a woman. He blames her for her lack of humanity, for her shortsightness and passivity, unaware of the fact that he himself concurred substantially to make of Arvay what she is. Consider, for example, the content of his accusation: " '... I don't want that stand-still, haphazard kind of love. I'm just as hungry as a dog for a knowing and a doing love. You love like a coward. Don't take no steps at all ...' " (230). In conveying his frustrations with an unsatisfactory relationship, his statements betray the absence of a logical inner-connectness between his assessment of Arvay's role and the role he assigned for himself in their relationship. The reader cannot question the legitimacy of his accusation, but s/he knows too well that Jim has appointed himself as the one who acts, rules, knows and point out things. Jim's one-sided perception of their relationship implies, thus, his own lack of self-knowledge that, ironically, undergirds his inflated self-assurance. Witness his reply to Arvay's attempt to relate what had happened when he grabbed the snake: " 'I see one thing and can understand ten. You see ten things and can't even understand one' " (229).

The proof of Jim's blindness rests, actually, on his misinterpretation of Arvay's paralysis. He takes it as an expression of hatred when, in reality, it has multilayered causes related to her rape, to her fear of Jim's aggressive sexuality, deeply embedded in her fundamentalist conscience, and to her resentment over Jim's authority. The phallic and Christian symbolism encoded in the scene substantiates such an interpretation, and points to male sexuality and domination as a deterrent

to Arvay's sense of humanity. Her failure to act constitutes, definitely, the most tangible evidence of her dehumanization.

It is inevitable that in the context of this "nagging" scene, the reader tends to view both Arvay and Jim as victimized by their entrapment in sexual roles, the result of which is the failure of mutuality, of companionship, of human growth and fulfillment. Yet, it is relatively easy to discern, on the grounds of what their exchange does to Arvay, that her entrapment is, by far, the most destructive kind because it involves a psychological process of capitulation to a self-evaluation entirely refracted through Jim's perspective. Since it is a perspective that precludes both his support and approval, Arvay is left pitifully exposed, confused, inarticulate and guilty, in a condition from which there is no way out to seek validation in her own terms. Her attempt to protest against Jim's way of loving her and which boils down to " 'the way you craved after my body' " (230) is, definitely doomed. In this sense, the bedroom is not only the intimate space of woman's physical debasement, but also the interior landscape of psychic closure. When Jim leaves her, Arvay tortures herself by trying to discover "what Jim expected of her" (235), hoping to regain her place near him. She is betrayed by the sexist nature of her nurture and her love becomes the full expression of internalized oppression.

The turning point of the novel is Arvay's journey back home to visit her mother's death-bed. It is both a physical and symbolic journey that is supposed to prepare for Arvay's awakening as the loving and protective wife of Jim Meserve or, as he puts it, " 'the woman I married you for' " (234). The self-deception that underpins her awakening is, however, promptly grasped by the reader who, on the absence of a detached narrator, is asked to assume a critical perspective in relation to what is posed as the beginning of a rebirth. It is important to add, or even clarify, that the lack of critical detachment on the part of the narrator, particularly in this

portion of the novel, makes her captive of Arvay's misleading perceptions, a fact that creates a sense of separatedness between the reader and the text.

With the marriage break up, Arvay seeks refuge in her past. Her mother's last wish to see her is transformed into a chance to recover an idealized way of life (238). The reader's suspicion that Arvay is deceiving herself is substantiated by the many references to God, a recurrent clue in Hurston's works that indicates the character's distance or retreat from reality:[23] "God was taking a hand in her troubles;" "God was showing favor to His hand-maiden;" "God was giving her another chance" (239). Indeed, Arvay's romantic expectations, stemming from the tripartite assumption poverty - kinship - happiness, are soon deflated by what she observes: the want and deprivation in her mother's sub-human condition; the greedy and coarse-looking members of her sister's family; the dirt and dilapidation of what she had regarded as her true home. It is a scene from which she withdraws in disgust. She does not repudiate her mother, the haunting image of a would-be-Arvay had she not married Jim Meserve, but she does repudiate her background and a way of life that seem to her degrading, and ultimately evil. Although the interlocking elements of her adolescent trauma of lovelessness and rejection that surface indirectly in her assessment of her mother's fate do weigh on her response to her mileu, it is her vision of the Cracker's poverty-stricken existence that becomes a determining factor in her awakening. Face with the unbearable economic constraints, Arvay is led to contemplate herself in a new light. She cannot but recognize and rejoice in the privileged position that her upward mobility marriage bestowed on her. Furthermore, her growing sense of being somebody, no more a Cracker, is socially validated on the occasion of her mother's death and funeral, the circumstances of which confirm the half-truths that cluster around Arvay's perceptions: solidarity and support are social manifestations of a moral and physical integrity that is, by all means,

intimately linked to upper-class socio-economic status. Within such a framework, it becomes rather easy, for Arvay, to consider her marriage's trade-offs: "Perhaps Jim's hankering after her was not such a burden to bear when she looked around at the lives of her old friends" (262).

At this point, there is hardly any question as to the course of Arvay's emotional development and the underlying motivation of her conscious desire to make up with Jim. The upsurge of gratefulness she feels towards Jim, who had rescued her from ignominy, triggers a nitty-gritty fact: to sustain the social identity she cherishes she cannot afford a separations that will mean a return to her origins. What follows is, then, less based on inner than on external pressure. Blaming her background for all her troubles in her relationship with Jim, Arvay moves into the terms of Jim's expectations, " 'I ought to have sense enough to appreciate what he's done,' " (272) in which process excluded is from her consciousness the level of reality that speaks of her enslavement and the suppression of her selfhood. Arvay's determination to hold on to the socio-economic security of her dependent marriage is symbolically articulated through her ritualistic actions. After her mother's funeral she burns the house down, that "evil ill-deformed monstropolous accumulation of time and scum" (269) and then, she watches the cleansing fire from under the mulberry tree, "her tree of life" (270):

> Like her Mama's keep-sakes, this mulberry tree was her memory-thing. It brought back to her the happiest and most consecrated moments of her lifetime. (...) Here, Arvay, the woman, had triumphed, and with nothing more than her humble self, had won her a vivid way of life with love. This tree was a sacred symbol. She wished that she could use it like a badge and pin it like a bouquet over her heart (269).

For the reader who knows that Arvay was raped under that tree, and that the rape marks the beginning of a

power relationship that strips her of her potentiality to evolve into mature and authentic selfhood, this romantic passage and the subsequent ones ring false because they mystify the content of Arvay's experience and twist its significance in her development as woman and as a person. If on the one hand, such a passage may sweep one momentarily off her/his critical feet, on the other hand, it gradually emerges, to any perceptive reader, as a construct that has nothing to do with the real but which translates an imaginary relationship into the real, that is, Arvay wishes and chooses to see her marriage experience not for what it is, but according to the way she wants to see it. Her self-deception functions to dispell the burden of economic dependency that presses Arvay to go back to Jim and, so, makes her marriage appear not as a materially dependent relationship, but as a consecration of her natural destiny.

At any rate, this passage initiates a rebirth from which Arvay emerges with a new personality. The self-confidence that her awareness of being part of a beautiful people instills in her, even adds a humanizing touch to her attitude in relation to others. She loosens up, displays a patronizing generosity towards her inferiors [Jeff and Janie Kelsey], and is cheerful about her home and her property, thus winning the sort of comment that delights her: " 'Just like Mister Jim, ain't she Janie? And everybody knows that Mister Jim is quality first-class. (...) Miss Arvay's done come to be just like him' " (275). Of course, one must reckon with the fact that Arvay's benevolence is the benevolence of someone who looks down from a throne, who realizes the social power of a position she is determined to keep and, therefore, acts accordingly.

Given the context of Arvay's development, the outcome towards which the whole plot moves is a predictable one. Arvay moves out into the man's world of heroic activity, the sea, as a passive onlooker to meet Jim in his own terms so as to win him back. The sea provides the symbolic backdrop for their reunion and a final

comment on their roles. Its life-giving waters, that Arvay thinks it wonderful to look at, is the milieu where Jim proves, once more, his manhood strength, by mastering his ship suggestingly named Arvay Henson, in the difficult crossing of the bar, and by displaying an unnecessary aggression, even savagery, towards a pregnant female shark caught in the shrimpnet.

The completion of Arvay's journey cannot but suggest a dé-jà vu. In their love-making, Jim acts as if he were "stalking a prey" (307) and Arvay never acts except to acquiesce with a yes. While, on the outside, she flatters Jim's manhood in the terms he wants to hear, probably to earn his approval, " 'I got the smartest husband in the world' " (284) or, " 'You're the boldest and noblest' " (292), on the inside, Arvay sees him as a little boy like Kenny who "hungered for her hovering" (310). The fear "like a birth pain" (291) she experienced on crossing the bar becomes a metaphorical intimation of her new servitude: "She was serving and meant to serve" (311). In this sense, her rebirth amounts to her belief that it is her holy privilege to efface herself and become a ministering angel "giving Jim the hovering that he needed" (311). It is not surprising that in this particular aspect of her double role of wife [whore]/ mother, Arvay compares herself to Holy Mary, the model of anti-sexual purity, a fact that sharply evinces Arvay's incapacity to make connections, to distinguish the contradictory aspects of her oppression as female and, finally, to redefine herself apart from Jim's needs.

Despite the fact that the narrative's point of view validates the terms of Arvay's awakening, the reader cannot evade its false colors. Arvay can never achieve a full identity by fulfilling the wife/mother roles. Her sense of "fullness" then, must be necessarily challenged because, in reality, she forfeits wholeness to live an emotional lie. To transform what she had viewed as "her cross" into "her glory" is to cheat oneself of integrity and humanity and to align herself with her own oppressor. Overall, Arvay does not quite emerge as a full-

fleshed character rooted in a real world. She seems to be insubstantial and immaterial, exactly the Seraph that Hurston meant her to be in the end.

Robert Hemenway makes an interesting statement about the novel: "For some reason Zora could not grant Arvay the attainment of a truly independent selfhood, the kind that Zora Neale Hurston had established in her own life."24 Perhaps, this is the moment to tackle the questions that this statement poses. Probably, one of the reasons is linked to the question of the class and race differences that prevented Hurston from identifying with Arvay on the same level at which she identified and established an empathic relationship between herself, as the author, and her major black women characters, who are strong, self-reliant women with a consciousness of their oppression and willing, either in words or in actions, to make a move towards autonomy and self-definition.

If, on the one hand, Hurston's great psychological insight into Arvay's inculturation and her entrapment in the sexual politics of capitalist patriarchy suggests a certain identification between Hurston and her character in terms of their common female condition in a male world, on the other hand, the creation of such a character meant, on the level of artistic inception, a straining against the boundaries of Hurston's cultural and racial identity, in which process her perceptions, as a writer self-consciously seeking to transcend the racial barrier, were nonetheless involved. More specifically, Hurston's experiential closeness to the long tradition of black womanhood, the parameters of which she established for herself in her own life, constituted the screen through which Hurston perceived the white woman in the bourgeois world, a world that is more rigidly structured to protect and glorify white womanhood but which, deceptively, turns her into a dependent, dehumanized being with no potential to speak out regarding her oppression and attain a authentic selfhood. Hurston's position towards the white woman lies within a symbolic space between the text and the reader, between

the narrative's point of view, that clearly suggests a complicity with the character, and the critical detachment it elicits from the reader. In this space where closeness and distance, identification and difference coalesce, Hurston, the author, is ideologically inserted, both as woman and black. Considering the intertextual context of her works, her engagement with a white female character still points to the chasm of experience that divides black from white woman. But it is a chasm that can be bridged, if not by effective sisterhood, by an awareness of the common roots of their oppression in a white capitalist patriarchal world.

Seraph on the Suwanee attests, thus, to the scope and strength of Hurston's fiction. It might be regarded as a retreat from the limit of experience she had previously achieved, especially in Their Eyes Were Watching God, but it asserts her commitment to a literary self-expression that, in this novel, reaches beyong racial definitions to break through the barrier of sexism that we have inherited through our cultural and political systems.

NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

[1] Moses, Man of the Mountain, Philadelphia: Lippincott Co., 1967.
All subsequent references are to this edition.

[2] Lawrence W. Levine, in Black Culture and Black Consciousness (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp 30-35 discusses extensively the function of this image in slave songs and spirituals. For Nathan Irvin Huggins (Black Odyssey, New York, Vintage Books, 1979), one of the reasons why blacks felt a proclivity towards the Old Testament was that its stories "conformed more to their own instincts for tribal and clan deities" (p. 76).

[3] Note that the snake, in voodoo, is the symbol of the supreme god, Danballa.

[4] This aspect is most visible in the teachings of Mentu, the stableman, who becomes Moses' first mentor. His counsel projects the ideology of male intellectual superiority in the realms of spirit and culture, while assigning the female a moral inferiority, smoothed over by a rhetoric of flattery: "The female companion of man has the gift of the soothing-balm of lies (p. 56)."

[5] Subjectivity here, means the thinking, speaking, acting and doing agent.

[6] According to Phyllis Bird in "Images of Women in the Old Testament," (Religion and Sexism, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), p. 61, Miriam stands along with other prophetesses as Deborah, Jesebel and Huldah who were strong-willed women, "endowed with the gift of persuasion and potentially dangerous to man."

[7] The Living Bible, Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1971, p. 61.

[8] It is interesting to note the narrator's description of both when they confront Moses: "Aaron saw Miriam looking at him right hard so he tightened his face up and said ..." (p. 262).

[9] I disagree with Ann L. Rayson who, in her article "The Novels of Zora Neale Hurston," p. 6, claims that Miriam is a "conniving double-dealer along with Aaron in a petty power struggle."

[10] The narrator draws a parallel between the sight of Zipporah with what Miriam experienced "that morning long ago when she had seen the daughter of Pharaoh bathing in the Nile" (269).

[11] The incident cannot but reminds us of the extermination [burning] of witches in the 15th century, whose esoteric knowledge and possessed speech constituted a threat to church hierarchy. For more information on the subject, see Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father, (Boston: Beacon Press, Inc., 1973) pp. 50-65.

[12] This dichotomy nature/culture brings us to Simone De Beauvior's seminal work, The Second Sex (New York: Random House, Inc., 1974), where she developed an analysis of woman's nature in society according to her societal role. According to her, woman represented nature because she retained the predetermined biological function of nature -- she was destined to repeat life. Man, on the other hand, controlled the forces of nature in the process of building a society and, thus, established himself as a subject. And according to Beauvior, this is the source of woman's inferiority.

[13] One is reminded, of course, of Richard Wright whose books Uncle Tom's Children (1936), Native Son (1940) and Black Boy (1945) mark the peak of social protest in the Negro novel. Written in the same naturalistic tradition, there is Chester Himes' If He Hollers Let Him Go (1945) and Ann Petry's The Street (1946), among others.

[14] Seraph on the Suwanee. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948. All subsequent references are to this edition.

[15] "The Dilemma of the Negro Author." American Mercury, 15, nº 60 (Dec. 1928), p. 479.

[16] The Negro Novel in America, pp. 155-166. Bone qualifies this trend as "the assimilationist impulse." He labels Seraph on the Suwanee, an assimilationist novel, along with William Gardner Smith's Anger at Innocence (1950) and Ann Petry's Country Place (1947).

[17] "Race and the Negro Writer" in Black Expression, Addison Gayle, Jr., ed. New York: Weybright and Talley, Inc., 1969, p. 257.

[18] Robert Hemenway, p. 293. Among these articles are "The 'Pet Negro' System," American Mercury, 56 (May, 1943), 593-600; "Negroes without Self-Pity." American Mercury, 57 (Nov., 1943), 601-603; and "Crazy for this Democracy," Negro Digest, 4 (Dec., 1945), 45-48.

[19] Negro Digest, 8 (Apr., 1950), p. 87.

[20] In the Preface to his monumental work The Emergence of the New South 1913-1945 (Louisiana: Louisiana University Press, 1967), George Brown Tindall qualifies the phrase "New South" as a historical period, rather than a doctrine, but he also acknowledges the fact that what happened in the South, mostly in the first half of this century, conformed to the 19th century industrial creed of the New South. Tindall sums up the essence of the southern emergence, which corresponds roughly to the background of Seraph: "In regional life the Southern people moved into a far more diversified, pluralistic society. For many Southerners the stresses of change set off defensive reactions against the new and unfamiliar, but for many others change offered at last an escape from poverty, both economic and cultural" (IX).

[21] The title evokes the white seraph worshipped by Mrs. Turner in Their Eyes Were Watching God.

[22] The incident with the snake evokes a scene from Hurston's 1926 short story "Sweat." Delia's paralysis, however, unlike Arvay's, has the connotation of a deviant, subversive act on the part of a woman who decides to fight for her personhood.

[23] For example, in "Sweat" and Jonah's Gourd Vine religion, manifested in the form of prayers, functions as a deterrent to the characters' capacity to confront reality and to act upon it because it fosters a conformist attitude in relation to the status quo. In Their Eyes Were Watching God, religious observations are signs of a withdrawal from the physical world. Precisely because Janie and Tea Cake lose themselves in religious thoughts, they are caught in the devastating hurricane that unchains their personal tragedy.

[24] Robert Hemenway, p. 313.

CONCLUSION

As a figure of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston left a unique imprint in the literature of the period. Charting her own course as a writer who always placed the content of her personal experience and the strength of her ties to the racial community before any preconceived notion as to which Negro material should deserve serious artistic treatment, Hurston rejected the semantics of acculturation espoused by the rising Black bourgeoisie of the 20's. She did not subscribe to the widely-held assumption that a mannered educated elite divorced from the great Black majority could effectively evolve the adequate parameters to establish a social system of artistic interaction between the artist and the people. At best, she sensed bourgeois nationalism to be a blind alley. It indulged the development of an imitative culture that, in advocating the Negro's humanity and refinement, addressed itself to a white audience, thus forfeiting its potential to become a channel for a vigorous and genuine black expression.

Hurston's closeness to the southern black folk culture, the source and sustenance of a black identity that did not evolve out of the pathology of servility fostered by white cultural imperialism, affected positively her stance as a black writer. She was a "New Negro" in her own right, an active participant in the consciousness - raising process unleashed by the Renaissance and still reverberating in Black literature of today. Yet, neither did she view herself as a member of the talented elite postulated by Locke and DuBois nor did she ever consider herself apart from the folk who, contrary to what was tacitly assumed, was articulate enough to nourish a culture that afforded a collective sense of Negro life in America. Hurston shunned the

artificial burden implicit in the bourgeois notion of the artist as part of a cultivated minority, and approached her background out of a deep emotional attachment to the place and the people she always regarded as her milieu. Her works, anchored firmly in the folk community of the rural South, attest to a clearly defined personal positioning which found resonances among the younger elements of the Renaissance. The truly radical premise that lies at the core of Hurston's urge to blackness is crystallized in Hughes' 1926 manifesto of Black nationalism. Its proposition of a Black literature independent of the middle-class perspective and liberated from the value-system of the White majority actually illuminates the ideological racial posture that inheres in Hurston's fictional practice. On affirming a racial identity, its linguistic-aesthetic sensibility carries the weight of a political gesture vis-à-vis the white dominant culture.

However, the true character of Hurston's body of writing is not defined only in terms of the superstructure of Black culture which it encodes and disseminates, as the present study shows. Hurston's engagement with folk community life is tempered by the sensitive and perceptive vantage point of a woman whose experiences as female in a constricted male-centered environment bear upon her fiction's content and point of view. Her narratives invariably deal with male/female power relations outside or within the patriarchal marriage structure and, thus, probe the experiences and meaning of being a black woman in a context of racial kinship, but defined by male supremacy. And it is precisely this concern with the sexual politics that bolster inequality and the oppression of woman that yields the texts' internal distance from the sexual value-system engrafted in the folk community and legitimized by its mores. In other words, the texts are informed by a feminist perspective that breaks through the layer of folk culture to uncover a level of reality concealed in its communal practices: woman's subjection to otherness and her victimization

by the black man's efforts to secure a masculine identity based on power and control over her person.]

This feminist perspective, indeed points to the convergence of personal-authorial factors in the shaping of Hurston's fiction. As seen in chapter one, the Renaissance was "predominantly a masculine affair"[1] and its racial ideology underscored the traditional male position that woman should stand behind black manhood and occupy her subordinate role as female in the name of their common cause for racial equality. Seen in relation to this priority, Hurston's fiction promotes an ideological distance from the historical moment in which she, a black woman writer, was inserted to the extent that it problematizes the male-centered attitudes embedded in the cultural and social practices of the folk by exposing their role in the oppression of black womanhood.

Hurston's fiction deviates radically from engaging in overt racial confrontation but it does reverberate with suggestions that sexual oppression within the folk community is a consequence of the politics of racial dominance which inflicted physical and psychological damage on black lives, in particular, the black man. Hurston was neither naive nor blind to the fact that the black community is an inset to a larger patriarchal and capitalist society dominated by the White man. Hence the social relations of domination and subordination by which the folk lives its sexual ideology are not mere cultural givens inscribed in traditional folk culture, but evolved as a reaction to and emulation of patterns of white manhood. The close readings of Jonah's Gourd Vine and Their Eyes Were Watching God, for instance, capture Hurston's historical consciousness of the conditions under which the oppression of black woman throve. Both novels weave a complex web of interconnections between sexual oppression and the assertion of black manhood under the stress of the double system of race and class dominance. In a society where manhood is defined by socio-economic status, power, and sexual control of woman, the black man either reacts to his powerlessness,

bequeathed by the system of slavery, by abusing the black woman, or seeks to consolidate his thirst for power and economic leverage with the White man by asserting himself as the rising bourgeois, thus reproducing in the home, the system of class-domination of society at large. In Hurston's insight into the dynamics of domestic tyranny lies, thereupon, her subtle, and often overlooked, protest against White oppression.

The sex-related context out of which Hurston writes brings to the forefront an image of the black woman that had been largely ignored, especially by the other woman writers of the Renaissance -- the southern black woman whose life bears the brunt of socio-economic constraints and the weight of exclusion, marginality and abuse imposed upon her by the politics of male rule. Hurston's exploration of such an image exposes the contradiction between her burgeoning humanity, that sustains a sense of self not assimilated into the oppressor's terms, and her demeaning sexual role that impresses her into servitude and powerlessness. Sometimes vulnerable to emotional manipulation that beclouds the underpinnings of a power relationship and besieges her soul, Hurston's black woman resists, nonetheless, the patriarchal character of black life by resenting her subservience through a language that releases her from invisibility and establishes a bridge of interaction with the community [characteristically of women, in many instances] of which she knows she is, culturally and ethnically, a part. The language with which she speaks of her anger and rebellion becomes a socially-oriented act that directs her toward and binds her to the group. It conveys kinship and the necessity to reintegrate the individual with the social in a reciprocal dialectic relationship.]

Unlike Fauset's black woman who succeeds in insulating herself with a particular class and a dependet marriage relationship, and Larsen's, who either aspires to an ornamental role in marriage for the sake of a security that is white in color, or rejects this role but finds herself empty of self-respect in a world with no alter-

natives, Hurston's black woman is aware of her lack and necessity for self-fulfillment. Janie Crawford, her most elaborate woman character, refuses to compromise with a white patriarchal class-bound marriage value-system. She challenges sexist practices, conventional morality and the definition of woman, and she insists on finding the terms for her fulfillment as a person within a specific group, neither white nor middle-class, but the folk with whom she shares a common identity.

Hurston's overall treatment of the black woman's experience of oppression and her aspiration for selfhood in a context demarked by racial affinity invites some final considerations about the relationship of Hurston, as author, with her works and her achievement as a black woman writer. My analysis has shown the presence of a feminist perspective that runs throughout her works and which is particularly embedded in the poignant bedroom and kitchen scenes, in the discourse of the female characters, and in the authorial management of the reader's sympathy towards them. It is a perspective that has a foothold in the ideological to the extent that it presses for the recognition of woman's status as a social group, an oppressed class in the grips of the illegitimate authority of the patriarchy, as well as for the rejection of those meanings and practices that attend a concept of manhood whereby womanhood is suppressed and denied. To assess the social and political significance of Hurston's perspective, however, one must necessarily take into account the racial determinant that intervenes and activates a difference in Hurston's feminist utterance. On the one hand, her feminist perspective is strengthened, in the works that focus on the black woman, by a point of view that clearly establishes an empathic relationship between narrator and character, a relationship that, in some instances, even succeedsin effacing the differences between the biographical subject [author]/narrator/character.[2] On the other hand, in Hurston's novel of white life, this perspective is compromised by a potentially deceptive point of view -- the trick of a fallible

narrator whose closeness to the character and validation of perceptions and experiences that violate the feminist aspiration, actually mask Hurston's emotional distance from the white woman character she conceived.

To acknowledge this difference which, born out of contrasting authorial attitudes, pertains to the writer's relationship with her texts is to argue for the insertion of Hurston herself, as a black woman, within her works in the form of an alignment that transcends the mere literary bond between the writer and her black female characters to point to a world of gender and race identifications that crosses the separation between image and reality, personal and literary points of view, subjective reality and the product of a creative imagination. Hurston's black woman is a sex, class and race-linked image rooted firmly in the context of real social relationships. As a paradigm of self-love, endurance and an independent will, she catalyzes the resources necessary to break the politics of sexual oppression. As a self-conscious member of a racial community, she rejects the white model and preserves her blackness, embodying, thus, the reality - principle of Black survival and struggle against the politics of racial dominance. From this standpoint, it is not incorrect to assume that Hurston's black woman is an extension of herself. She is the socio-political expression of a black feminism that, emerging out of the synthesis between literary praxis and personal experience, has the ideological potential to bridge the gap between a female and a black identity and become a matrix for collective consciousness, black and white. Actually, Hurston's black feminism encompasses an inclusive and truer apprehension of reality to the extent that it opposes itself to all the illusions of a society whose social and economic arrangements allow one group of persons, a class, and a race to control and exploit the other. Essentially humanistic at its core for its implicit stand against the degradation of human dignity, it suggests the cogency of vision that buttresses the ideological process [the production of meanings and ideas]

of her fictional practice: sexual and cultural liberation entail both a search for one's identity apart from outside definitions and a break from the system of domination that corrupts and destroys one sense of personhood/ peoplehood.

Hurston's fiction, ultimately validated by the inescapable historical condition of the writer's double identity, presages the necessary changes in consciousness that will put an end to the polarization between black woman and black man and to the divisions within the black community, so Blacks may become full subjects of their own history. Referring to her writing in her autobiography, she said: "I had things clawing inside of me that must be said."[3] Despite her disabilities of sex and race, Hurston did convey in her fiction what she wanted to say -- with the sword in her hand. She was a woman well before her time and still half in shadow today, but her works, restored to significance, deserve their rightfull place in Afro-American tradition and in the feminist tradition of women writers. They point directly to a new generation of black woman writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou in whose works the impulse to engage, through the word, in the dialectics of sexual and cultural liberation, represents an ongoing collective effort to humanize our lives and correct the warp in a sexually and racially biased culture.

NOTES TO THE CONCLUSION

[1] According to Gloria T. Hull in "Black Women Poets from Wheatley to Walker" in Sturdy Black Bridges, p.81.

[2] Such is the case of "Drenched in Light," Their Eyes Were Watching God and to a lesser degree, Jonah's Gourd Vine.

[3] Dust Tracks on the Road, p. 264.

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