

Black Women's Search for Identity in Rural Communities: A Recurring Theme for Afro-American Female Novelists

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What influence has the rural black community had on Afro-American women's sense of self? One way of attempting to answer this question might be through an analysis of fiction which deals with black women's search for identity. A number of novels, particularly those by black women, are concerned not only with the personal quest of their protagonists, but also with their relationships to the community. In considering the influence of community on self, I have chosen three novels by female novelists which have black women as protagonists: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zola Neale Hurston; *Sula* by Toni Morrison; and *Meridian* by Alice Walker. In each of these works, the black women's quest involves struggles with the traditional sexual roles preserved by their community.

The uniqueness of the rural community lies in its being usually a segregated one, as in the case of Eatonville described in Hurston's fiction. In contrast, the authors who deal with urban life put their emphasis on depicting antagonism between black and white people. Thus, the authors whom I am about to examine concentrate on intraracial relationships; the rural communities depicted, by and large, become sources of identity for the protagonists. The varying degree of conflict between the surrounding community and the protagonists, in other words, is the most important element in their struggle for self-realization. Compared with this, the black-white relationship, a subterranean force beneath the surface of black rural life, seldom becomes the dominating reality; white oppression seldom plays a definitive role in the spiritual development of the heroines. The rural communities, in these novels, are life-giving and self-sufficient. We must not fail, though, to take into consideration the authors' reservation about the negative aspects of the communities.

It is not only female writers who deal with women's experiences in the rural black areas. There are works by male writers such as Jean Toomer's *Cane* and Ernest J. Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*; their heroines, however, seldom achieve their personal search for identity. I have chosen, therefore, to concentrate on women novelists who have created protagonists whose sense of self is secure enough

for the psychological burden which the writers mean them to carry.

Women novelists' preoccupation with intraracial relationships is often expressed in male-female relationships. Do these relationships work? If not, why? This question will also be my concern. By showing the ways in which male-female relationships function or fail to function, these writers obviously direct their messages at the black communities themselves.

If an Afro-American writer is preoccupied with intraracial relationships, he or she is likely to have pointed out by critics their lack of social consciousness. Hurston and Morrison have been criticized for being insensitive to 'racial issues'.⁽¹⁾ The reason for their concentration on problems within black communities has to do with their vision of the role of a novelist. In order to show what this vision is and how Hurston, Morrison, and Walker share a similar creative goal, I would like to discuss first their views on intraracial relationships.

There are two ideas against which Hurston, as a trained anthropologist and as an artist committed to the folk, reacted. On the one hand, the sociology of her day assumed that oral tradition among lower-class people was a self-defense mechanism of an economically and culturally deprived race. On the other hand, white anthropologists, in their humanistic zeal tried to prove that there were no significant cultural differences between the races. According to this theory, black Americans shared essentially the same culture as white Americans, and where they differed, the differences could be accounted for as exclusively the result of environmental deprivation.⁽²⁾ The implication was that lower-class black Americans had no distinctive culture or subculture of their own. Hurston, in her works, tried to show that black people have a dignified and sophisticated culture; it has an independent esthetic value which can be viewed without constant reference to white oppression. For her, oral patterns preserved in rural communities such as lying competitions, tale-tell sessions, 'signifying', and mock-courtship are eloquent evidences of black people's triumph over their oppressive environment. In addition, Hurston is a successful novelist who was on her own by the age of fourteen. Her philosophy, confirmed by her own career, is one of almost aggressive individualism. For such a woman, black self-pity was anathema. In an article entitled "How It Feels to Be Colored Me", published in the *World Tomorrow* in May, 1928, Hurston declares that racial discrimination has not affected her in any way;

I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. . . . I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal.⁽³⁾

Thus, to dwell on discrimination is, for her, self-indulgent. Her personal philosophy

is shaped from her childhood observation of proud and independent people in her birthplace, Eatonville, Florida, a self-governing, all-black town.

Even though she left Eatonville at an early age, the source of her fiction has always come from the peaceful and life-giving atmosphere of her native village. Thus, her created world does not reflect the bitterness and anger of Southern black experiences in the 1930s.

Morrison also has an ultimately affirmative vision of the black community, though, in her fiction, it is much more elusive than Hurston's. For Morrison, the resilience, tenacity, irony, and integrity of black people are expressed in their capacity to accept a wide variety of behaviors. Such behaviors do seem to be deviant and Morrison has been criticized for presenting such types in her fiction. She defends herself by saying that many blacks have become obsessed with respectability as a result of their acceptance of white middle-class values. To repudiate stereotypes by creating 'virtuous' counterimages is to recognize their significance to Afro-American life:

It used to annoy me [Morrison says in an interview] tremendously problems that are fraudulent to begin with Racial redress. It is as if they were saying, 'Why don't you provide for us, in a wishful thinking sort of way, the kind of life and characters that we aspire to be?' And that's a nasty thing to require of a writer.⁽⁴⁾

It is of vital importance, Morrison is saying, to accept and pass on the Afro-American cultural heritage, tormented as it is.

It has become [necessary] to find some way to hold on to the useful past without blocking off the possibilities of the future.⁽⁵⁾

As in the cases of Hurston and Morrison, Walker is a writer who believes in common people as the most important subject in black fiction. She feels that the mainstream of Afro-American literature has reached a kind of stalemate because its spokesmen (mainly males) have moved away from the black community as a source of identity toward interracial confrontation:

It seems to me that black writing has suffered, because even black critics have assumed that a book that deals with the relationships between members of a black family—or between a man and a woman—is less important than one that has white people as a primary antagonist. The consequence of this is that many of our books by "major" writers (always male) tell us little about . . . black people, and a lot about isolated (often improbable) or limited encounters with a nonspecific white world.⁽⁶⁾

White oppression, Walker is saying, is not the whole of black experience. The culture is not an exclusive product of self-defense mechanisms. If a writer is insensitive to this fact and dwells on fear and self-hatred, it shows how he is unconsciously affected by white standards of value. By putting themselves in a proper perspective in the history of the race, black can become aware of their ability to incorporate oppressive lessons into a part of the ongoing revolutionary process. Walker urges black people to take advantage of their racial heritage, for a person's major purpose in life is to achieve a full humanity which transcends any environmental, political, or racial reality. Black people have inherited from African culture an intuition to perceive mystery in the surrounding nature which helps them to keep an organic union with it.⁽⁷⁾ Afro-American's openness to mystery helps him to be fully humane. It is what Walker calls the achievement of saintlihood:

... the greatest value a person can attain is full humanity, which is a state of oneness with all things, and a willingness to die (or to live) so that the best that has been produced can continue to live in someone else.⁽⁸⁾

For Walker, the novelist's goal is to affirm the possibility of an individual's self-knowledge, a necessary preliminary to the deliverance of the race. Thus, her vision of the Afro-American future is optimistic.

Both Morrison and Walker are indebted to Hurston in 1) their emphasis on intraracial relationships and in 2) their positive recognition of Afro-American culture among the lower-class people. All three are concerned with the problems of male-female relationships in black communities. They have shown how the establishment of a right kind of relationship between a man and a woman goes before the establishment of a liberated relationship among community members. Specifically, this theme is shown in female characters' rejection of the various roles allotted to them by communities and in the communities' response to their behaviors. Considering the contemporary writers' debt to Hurston which I have already specified, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a proper book with which to begin my analysis.

Hurston's heroine is Janie, a beautiful octoroon whose conflict is her own romantic notion of love versus her black community's conventional notion of love; she dreams that someday a prince will come her way and provide her with the experience of loving and being loved. Two husbands enter her life; Logan Killicks, a well-off but aged farmer who looks like an "ole skullhead in de grave yard"; and Joe Starks, an energetic striver who stops to marry her on his way to Eatonville where he becomes the mayor, postmaster, largest landowner, general storekeeper, and a successful businessman. Both men regard her a fair spoil; a visible symbol of their achievements. They cannot understand her emotional needs and cannot give her anything beyond material comfort. Janie finds her happiness in the person of her third husband Tea

Cake, a free-spirited itinerant laborer and gambler. The two move from Eatonville and work together in the "muck", the rich black soil near Lake Okeechobee in the Everglades. Her married bliss, however, is short-lived; Tea Cake is killed by Janie in the act of self-defence when he develops the symptoms of rabies (he has been bitten by a mad dog) and in his delirium tries to shoot her. Janie comes back to Eatonville after she is released from her trial on murder to communicate her knowledge in life to her people.

The most important person in Janie's formative period is her grandmother Nanny. Nanny is an ex-slave who has survived various hardships. She was the concubine of the plantation master. Her daughter was raped by a white man. She knows that black men release their frustration by sexually exploiting their women. Determined to protect her granddaughter from such a degrading fate, she marries her to Logan Killicks. Killicks tries to subordinate Janie. ('You ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh.') When Janie complains that she cannot love her husband, Nanny snaps:

... Dis love! Dat's just whut's got us uh pullin' and uh haulin' and sweatin' and doin' from can't see in de mornin' till can't see at night.⁽⁹⁾

Janie understands "that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman."

Joe Starks further initiates her into life. As Mrs. Mayor Starks, she is supposed to do what is only appropriate to her status. Joe forbids her to participate in the verbal rituals daily carried out at the front porch of his store, saying that Eatonville people are "trashy" (that is, they lack his drive.) As Janie says later, Joe "classed me off." As I have already pointed out,⁽¹⁰⁾ the oral tradition in the rural community has a sustaining effect on community members. Black people share communication codes which maintain protest elements. These elements are safely kept from white people so that they can enjoy a wonderful sense of security. It is in these gatherings that a black person can affirm his dignity as a human being; not as "de mule uh de world"—a beast of irrational burden:

... 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. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment.⁽¹¹⁾

People create communal values in vivid, colorful images:

When the people sat around on the porch and passed around the pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see, it was nice. The fact that the thought pictures were always crayon enlargements of life made it even nicer to listen to.⁽¹²⁾

This gathering is also traditionally a male sanctuary. ('Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chicken and cows.') Isolated from this life-giving culture, Janie learns to be hypocritical in order to survive:

She had an inside and outside now and suddenly she knew not to mix them.⁽¹³⁾

Tea Cake rescues her from such hypocrisy and role-playing. He is interested in her personality and is willing to treat her as an equal. For example, to Janie's delighted surprise, he wants her to play checkers with him and they play before the disapproving Eatonville audience. Certainly not an ideal husband, (Tea Cake can be a sexist, too) he grants her a dignity of self.

By the time she meets Tea Cake, Janie's adolescent romanticism has subsided and she can enter a male-female relationship based on free choice without illusion. It is also the time for her to participate in the rich oral tradition of a black community:

...The men held big arguments here the muck like they used to do on [Eatonville's] store porch. Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest.⁽¹⁴⁾

But in order to do so, Janie has to be educated to the point where she is able to make realistic appraisal of things. In this respect, her emotional experiences with sexism and the caste-system provide a useful preparation for her awakening of self.

Now, she comes to understand that Nanny's philosophy is no longer the only way to approach life as a black woman:

She [Nanny] was borned in slavery time when folks, dat is black folks, didn't sit down anytime dey felt lak is. 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 coss. Git up on uh high chair and sit dere. She didn't have time tuh think whut tuh do after you got up on de high stool lak she tole me, be... Ah done nearly languished tuh death up dere.⁽¹⁵⁾

Nanny confuses security with happiness. People can be free not by emulating whites but by establishing a horizontal relationship among community members; in order to do so, individuals must be prepared to enter a right kind of relationship between equals by mutual consent.

We have seen Hurston's idealized vision of a black community where people are a part of an alive and pleasing culture. The relationship between the sexes becomes the index of the psychic health of black people. And white oppression does not play any definitive role; it enters into the story only to show how the heroine's vision of herself has matured. (Janie, for example, calmly reflects on the absurdity of her situation when her life or death is being decided upon by white juries who know nothing about her and Tea Cake.)

In Morrison's novel, again, white oppression does not affect the heroine in the ways that it does the rest of the community; a fact that estranges her from her community. The heroine, Sula, is so unconventional as to suffer total deprivation and death in the uncomprehending community. *Sula* is a story of the clash between two ways of life in which no reconciliation is attempted because one side is not interested in learning the other's values and the other is too scared to be interested. Thus, it is not a fable about spiritual regeneration (in the way that Hurston's and Walker's novels are) but it is a fable about the injection into the community of the first knowledge of a new life-style. Morrison's chief message concerns the need of the community to be informed by a new sensibility.

Nel Wright, a ten-year-old in Medallion City, Ohio, becomes close friends with Sula Peace in 1920. Sula's mother, Hannah, is a sensuous widow who annoys Medallion women by her promiscuity. Sula's grandmother Eva is supposed to have stuck one leg under a train in order to collect insurance money because she was deserted by her husband and had three young children to support. Nel and Sula share a grave secret—they are responsible for the drowning of a little boy named Chicken Little. Eva burns her son who returns as a broken man from the war ostensibly because she would save his manhood from a miserable continuing life, but really because there has been sexual attraction between mother and son and she prefers kindred-killing to a spiritual incest. ('I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man.') This unnatural act seems to invite nature's revenge; Eva witnesses the burning of her daughter Hannah which is caused by a shift in the wind. On Nel's wedding day, Sula leaves for the North. Nel becomes a typical housewife.

Ten years later, Sula returns and horrifies people by violating the communal mores; she sends her grandmother to an old folk's home; she begins sleeping around, including Jude Greene, Nel's husband. Nel stops seeing Sula after her adultery has dissolved her marriage. By making Sula a common enemy, the community uses her presence to stick together. Sula becomes ill and dies as a pariah. Immediately before

Sula's death, Nel goes to see her but finds her as incomprehensible as ever. People are exultant over Sula's death. But it brings nothing good. The black community is removed to make room for a city golf course. After more than twenty years, Nel begins to see that Sula offended people because she chose a completely different lifestyle.

As seen from the plot described above, two philosophies of life quarrel in *Sula*—that of a creativity which prefers mobility and that of a survival which prefers stability. The Medallion community in 1920s suffers from a high rate of unemployment caused by the Depression. Segregation is everywhere; from the train coaches to the educational system. Conditions have changed little since the community began. It is called the "Bottom" even if it is located in the hilly part around the city. It was originally a piece of land which a cunning white farmer persuaded his unsuspecting slave to take, pretending it was Heaven's bottom—nearest to God. There, planting is backbreaking and the soil is sterile.

Naturally, a popular wisdom is shaped which consists of complete acceptance of chance and physical necessity and a clinging to what little black people are allowed to own:

What was taken by outsiders to be slackness, slovenliness or even generosity was in fact a full recognition of the legitimacy of forces other than good ones... They did not believe death was accidental—life might be, but death was deliberate. They did not believe Nature was ever askew—only inconvenient... The purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined (without ever knowing they had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance. They knew anger well but not despair, and they didn't stone sinners for the same reason they didn't commit suicide—it was beneath them.⁽¹⁶⁾

Thus, the only way to deal with overwhelming adversity is to outwit it by simply surviving it. It is a survival mechanism; it seeks to disrupt the natural course as little as possible. The same goes with human behaviors. The safest way to ensure social stability is to conform to communal codes. Women's roles are rigidly defined because the community's continuity depends upon their reproductive ability.

At first sight, this community seems to allow a wide variety of behaviors. It accepts the eccentricity of Shadrack, the shell-shocked soldier trying to give order to a world which his madness perceives as chaotic. It includes the varied lifestyles of women; the demure hypocrisy of Mrs. Helene Wright, Nel's mother; the arrogance of Eva who plays God (she names her protégés and she presumes to know what is best for her son); the sexual appetite of Hannah who wants sensual delight without the responsibility which sexual relationships may involve. But the community is

actually restrictive; women are accepted as long as they function as mothers, daughters, and wives. For example, Eva is capable of great self-sacrifice for her children and Hannah ably manages her family, friends, and constant flow of boarders.

When Eva and Sula confront each other, it is really a quarrel between exploration, represented by Sula, and conformity, represented by Eva. Eva, speaking for community, feels communal survival is at stake in the face of Sula's scorn at women's roles:

[Eva asks] "...When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you."

"I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself."

"Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man."⁽¹⁷⁾

In order to know Sula's peculiar quality of mind, we must trace her mental development. As a young girl, she believes in ties with other people. Her mother robs her of this belief. Hannah's uniqueness is in her total lack of possessiveness. Hannah deal with her daughter exactly as she does with her sexual partners; hers is uninterested detachment. ('I love Sula. I just don't like her.') This experience teaches Sula that maternal love is an illusion. On the same day, she drowns Chicken Little. Sula is as scared and confused as Nel is self-possessed and practical. The accident marks Sula's second growth; Sula learns that she does not feel in a way people are supposed to feel on such occasions; no responsibility, guilt, or remorse. She comes to know that she has cultivated illusions about herself. She begins to look for knowledge. ('As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life...') She watches her mother burning in fascination. She does not mind dying as long as she learns what it is like. Her avidity of interest would be both sadistic and masochistic if it is not what it is—a disinterested passion for knowledge.

Sula's search for knowledge takes the form of sexual activity. But it only tells her that most people are—unlike herself—unwilling to know about themselves. Thus, she is making judgments on her sexual partners and this fact upsets the Medallion community because they cannot label her promiscuity in the same way that they could Hannah's as 'lust'. Because her act of exploration only confirms her difference from other people, it becomes introvert; it becomes passion for self-knowledge. And she does understand herself; she is capable of inflicting pains because she cannot feel. But aren't most people less sympathetic than they imagine themselves to be? Only they do not want to learn it. Isn't she better than them in facing the reality? On her deathbed, Sula tries to communicate this knowledge to Nel, but she fails. ("About who was good. How you know it was you?" Sula asks Nel, "... maybe it wasn't you.

Maybe it was me."')

At the end of the story, the crazed Eva blames Nel for killing Chicken Little out of spite. It chillingly illuminates the real meaning of the half-forgotten past. Nel begins to understand that she was calm when she saw the boy drowned because she enjoyed the sight. She had cultivated illusions about herself. She vaguely understands that Sula's eccentricity was her way of rejecting this kind of self-deception. Thus, Morrison wishes us to know, an unthinking conformity often results in the lack of self-knowledge.

The black community, with its emphasis on survival, is afraid of experiences. Sula's exploration is potentially able to revitalize the community. But the problem is that Sula is denied the possibility of growth by the author. Sula wilfully refuses to be interested in communal laws. She is unable to communicate the differences between survival and creativity, conformity and exploration, and role and self. She ends with a sterile narcissism.

If a reconciliation had been possible, the community may have given Sula a sense of security. The community, in turn, could have learned new creativity. Sula's illness, in this respect, is both real and symbolic, physical and spiritual. On the one hand, it is a real sickness of the body; on the other, it is a sickness of the spirit induced by her lonely loveless condition; she clings to her questioning mind; she is destroyed by her bigotry.

The other question Morrison asks is why a male-female relationship does not work in a black community. Sula, during her wandering in the North, finds that men view women as the extension of themselves, the vessel, or in some symbolic role which their emotional needs create. ("the men... had merged into one large personality; the same language of love..., the same cooling of love.") The issue becomes complicated in a black community because white oppression has an emasculating effect on black men. They, more than white men, need to feed on fantasies about women. A male ego is bruised by direct and indirect contact with the white world. It needs to be propped up in relationships with women. Some can release their fear and self-hatred in abuse of wives and children. Others can find solace in imagining their women's claim of inferiority and their need for protection. The typical sexuality of black men is expressed in Jude Greene's interior monologue on the desirability of marriage. He is frustrated in his dream of working for the city's tunnel construction:

...he stood in lines for six days running and saw the gang boss pick out thin-armed white boys from the Virginia hills and the bull-necked Greeks and Italians and heard over and over, "Nothing else today. Come back tomorrow,"... rage and a determination to take on a man's role anyhow... made him press Nel about settling down. He needed some of his appetites filled, some posture of adulthood recognized, but mostly he wanted someone

to care about his hurt, to care very deeply . . . a someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up. And in return he would shelter her, love her, grow old with her . . . The two of them together would make one Jude.⁽¹⁸⁾

Black men are especially vulnerable to vertical relationships due to their circumstances. A conventional man like Jude feels threatened by Sula's oddity—a woman who refuses to play roles. That is why involvement with Sula is such a shattering experience to him.

As a consequence of this mental castration, black women are unable to define themselves except in relation to their husbands and children. They confuse their own identity with domestic roles; Nel, a law-abiding woman, suffers from a loss of her identity when Sula deprives her of this illusion by sleeping with Jude.

A complete man in the story is Sula's lover, Ajax. He is free to formulate himself because of his mother's neglect. He is not a victim of black male pathology. ('He had had several messes with the police . . . and regarded them as the natural hazards of Negro life.') Ajax treats Sula as a whole person and he is secure enough not to be intimidated by her. Ironically, through her relationship with Ajax, Sula learns something of communal values—love as possession, faithfulness, and the nature of a permanent relationship.

As we have seen, Hurston and Morrison are concerned with intraracial relationships. Walker is concerned with establishing a healthy relationship—interracial as well as intraracial. Among the three, she is the author who allows white oppression to affect her heroine most intensely; Walker does believe that racism has affected black people in significant ways. Walker's central concern, however, is to show how personal liberation can have a place in the racial emancipation. The two themes—human relationships and the achievement of identity on both personal and collective levels—are connected by the search for identity of three principal characters; Meridian Hill, a black woman; her friend Truman Held, a civil rights worker turned New York artist; and his Jewish wife, Lynne.

In the early 1970s, Truman meets his old friend Meridian in Georgia who is still trying to organize neighborhoods around local issues through her symbolic protest. About ten years before she was expelled from a New York group of civil right workers. The movement has increased in militancy in the mid-sixties. The group has required each member to declare his willingness to kill for the cause of revolution as well as to die for it. Meridian is one of those awkward people who cannot promise things without living them out. Failing the test, she returns to the South. She is determined to continue the out-of-date strategies of non-violence of the sixties until she finds new ones adequate for the seventies. Truman deserts his wife and daughter when the rise of black nationalism makes interracial marriage a sensitive issue. A little earlier, Lynne was raped by Truman's friend Tommy Odds who was badly

injured by white racists and who had sought a revenge. After their daughter dies as a victim of a white man's violence, the link between Truman and Lynne seems to be utterly lost. Truman begins to court Meridian. Lynne resents this and is openly hostile to Meridian. Lynne is slowly disintegrating. In the end, Meridian feels herself free from her problems. Lynne and Meridian are reconciled. Lynne and Truman are reunited.

Meridian's political issue is complicated by a psychological wound. From early childhood, she has been goaded by a sense of guilt toward her mother; she feels that childcare and other domestic responsibilities have thwarted her mother's emerging self. Her guilt is further aggravated when she gives her child away to accept a scholarship to a prestigious black women's college. (She has married and had a baby at an early age; she divorced when her husband took up with another woman.) She feels that she does not live up to the standard of motherhood set up by her maternal ancestors who made great sacrifices to keep the family unit intact in spite of historical hardships:

... She thought of her mother as being worthy of this maternal history, and of herself as belonging to an unworthy minority, for which there was no precedent and of which she was, as far as she knew, the only member.⁽¹⁹⁾

In her college days, she seeks to expiate her failure in motherhood through vicarious experiences. She first tries to civilize the Wild Child, a young tramp. Her efforts fail when the girl is killed by a car in her flight from Meridian. Next, Meridian invites a young girl, Ann, to a sit-in demonstration. But when they are arrested together and put in the separate cells, she thinks that she hears Ann's wailing voice. At the end of the novel, she overcomes her feelings of inadequacy as a mother by regaining a mother's generative ability—not in a biological sense (for her tubes were tied when she aborted Truman's child) but because she provides him with a motivating force to search for his own humanity. Truman is also goaded by feelings of guilt.

Truman, a black intellectual from the North, is a person who wishes to be recognized by white society. He tries to do this by becoming as different as possible from ordinary black people. He dismisses black culture as crude and provincial and worships 'the higher' European culture. (From thence his constant mouthing of French phrases.) Meridian, a girl from a local town, idolizes his sophistication. ('He was a man who fought against obstacles, a man who could become anything, a man whose very words were unintelligible without considerable thought.') She finds him mysterious and strong—'the conquering prince.'

But Truman is a conquering prince in other ways than Meridian thinks. He finds Meridian funny—her provinciality, seriousness, and naïveté is diverting but

has no power to engage his strong feelings. He is mainly interested in her body. He finds her unmarriageable due to his sophisticated conventionality. He pretends to despise the standards of the world (as seen in his dabbling in the black liberation movement) but in fact conforms himself wholly to them. His concept of a desirable wife is one who is 'interesting' in a way that Meridian can never be—that is, capable of free play of mind. At the same time, she should be idealistic enough to worship him. The girl he chooses is Lynne, a white civil rights volunteer with a middle-class background. Lynne has enough worldly experience but is unsoiled; she happens to have too much leisure to be otherwise. Thus Meridian—who has a troubled background—is disqualified. Even if Meridian had been a virgin, he could not have loved a woman who by temperament is unable to suppress her ideas and moral emphasis on them.

Tommy Odds' incident triggers Truman's reflection on his marriage. He wonders whether Lynne can be guilty simply because she is white. He reaches the conclusion that he is guilty because he had loved the wrong person. He seeks to make up for his misguided marriage and earlier rejection of his own culture by celebrating black beauty in his arts and by courting Meridian. He is irritated by Lynne's vivacity; he fondly imagines that Meridian, in her sweetness, would not mind being someone else's resource. He does not recognize that he constitutionally cannot love Meridian—a woman claiming the autonomy of her imagination. Meridian tries to make him see this but fails:

... "I don't owe Lynne the way I do you. You notice I don't lie and say I don't love her at all. She's meant a great deal to me. But you're different. Loving you is different—"

"Because I'm black?"

"You make me feel healthy, purposeful—"

"Because I'm black?"

"Because you're you, damn it! The woman I should have married and didn't!"

"Should have loved, and didn't," she murmured.⁽²⁰⁾

In the end, Truman achieves full humanity by accepting the consequences of his choice; he returns to Lynne. Belatedly, he gains self-knowledge; he has realized that it is Lynne whom he loves. Their reunion suggests that Truman is ready to find ways that he can be faithful to his people on his own terms.

As we have partly seen, Walker does consider why male-female relationships do not work. Walker brings up this point in Lynne's cynical analysis on the relationship between Truman and Meridian, which is as wrong as it is acute; it is wrong because the main reason for their inability to have a permanent relationship depends on the conflict between their complex personalities:

What's between you is everything that could have happened and didn't, because you were both scared to death of each other . . . people like you and Truman who have to keep analyzing each other's problems.⁽²¹⁾

Here, Walker touches upon one historical aspect of sexism in black communities. Slavery, Walker says elsewhere, has destroyed the original egalitarian and cooperative relationship between black men and women and has recreated it as the American system of white male domination. Black men's sense of shame toward black women is caused by their awareness of the history of black women's abuse, of black men's incapacity, and of their perpetual need of mutual protection.⁽²²⁾

Thus, sexism and racism are interdependent and they distort the mutual perception of men and women. Interracial relationships are likewise affected. White women's sanctity first provided white men with justification for lynching. White women, says Walker, have been thus a threat to black masculinity, a chief cause for black men's need to apologize and explain their existence from the time of slavery. For Truman's friends, Lynne is not a personality but a stereotype:

. . . To them she [Lynne] was a route to Death, pure and simple . . . They did not even see her as a human being, but as some kind of large, mysterious doll. A thing of movies and television, of billboards and car and soap commercials.⁽²³⁾

Thus, black men accept the white male value that white women are the American success symbol.

The baselessness of white women's sanctity is shown in the episode of "Marilene O'Shay, One of the Twelve Human Wonders of the World". This Southern woman has been killed by her husband because she committed adultery. According to the Southern mores, this murder is perfectly justifiable. Her husband made her a mummy and earns a living by the exhibition. Originally the myth of fragile Southern lady who needs male protection had nothing to do with the reality of hard physical labor and perpetual pregnancy. The stereotype of lewd black males who sought, more than anything else, to sleep with white women was widespread in plantation days. Thus, violation of white women who had to keep white men's legitimate lines became violation of white men's birthright.⁽²⁴⁾ Southern women in the myth are deprived of this illusion of sanctity at the slightest act of self-assertion.

Absurd as it is, this stereotype of white womanhood affects Lynne's relationships with black men. There are many black men in this novel who have a special penchant for sleeping with white women. Partly, it is because they accept the white men's viewpoint that white women are the precious sexual object. Also, black men think that to sleep with white women is to degrade them. Lynne comes to see herself

from the black men's viewpoint. Because her husband begins to worship what she can never be—black women—, she has a deep feeling of inferiority toward them. She clings to the myth of white womanhood—she is supposed to have a tremendous sexual appeal over black men. She tries to feel superiority over black women by seducing their men; she wants them to grieve. But they only despise her. Thus, Lynne's problem is how she can regain her normal perspective on human relationships. This is achieved through her reconciliation with Meridian, first by their shared love for the South and next, by her growing awareness of her own Jewishness—the recognition that her people are also the victims of the Southern racism:

“Black folks aren't so special,” she said. “I hate to admit it. But they're not.”

“Maybe,” said Meridian . . . , “the time for being special has passed. Jews are fighting for Israel with one hand stuck in a crack in the Wailing Wall . . . black folks and Jews held out as long as they could.”

“Good God, this is depressing . . . It's even more depressing than knowing I want Truman back . . . he saved me from a fate worse than death. Because of him, I can never be as dumb as my mother was . . .”⁽²⁵⁾

Meridian's spiritual rebirth is achieved through her recognition of the vitality of black people who can change their adopted religion, Christianity, to fit their needs—to continue their struggle for social betterment. (In one of the Southern black churches, the hymns are changed so as to fit in a contemporary social context and the minister, in a style which imitates Martin Luther King Jr., preaches not the imminence of God but the urgency of joining in the war against racism. The stained-glass is a picture of an angry young man called 'B. B. with Sword'.)

By recognizing her own place in the history of this creative race, she finds a missing piece for the connection between social change and a revitalized personality—revitalized in the sense she becomes aware that she can never give up her humanity in the name of a revolutionary killing. She passes on the achievement of saintliness to Truman. (“I set you free . . .” Meridian tells Truman, “You are free to be whichever way you like, to be with whoever, of whatever color or sex you like—and what you risk in being truly yourself, the way you want to be, is not the loss of me . . .”’) The freedom of black people can be delivered only by self. By attaining perfect self-knowledge, one can face the future accommodated to one's own needs and capacities.

Black Christianity is used in the story not as a vehicle of regeneration but as a cultural phenomenon which exemplifies racial strength. Religion, it seems, is an active obstacle to the deliverance of the self; the Baptist church rejects Meridian's great-grandmother's ecstatic union with nature as heretic (in Walker's philosophy, animism is of vital importance to a healthy psyche); Meridian's mother uses religion

as the easiest means of escape from her frustration. Walker defines "the humanity of man-womankind" as "a God worth embracing" and Christianity, as an organized religion, is to be repudiated because it makes people hypocritical. But Walker's childhood background of Baptism (which she repudiates as a grown-up) still influences her in a significant way; that is, her notion of Christ. Walker accepts Christ not as the Son but as a representative figure on the side of the oppressed. In her fiction, a person who achieves full humanity is also a person who is willing to die for other people's rebirth.

The final aspect to be considered is the curious asceticism prevailing in the novel. Meridian can never enjoy sexual activity; for her, it is 'giving in'—two people seeking to dominate each other, rather than to meet on equal terms. Meridian and Truman become like a brother and sister. Truman returns to his wife only on the condition that there will be no more sharing of the bed. Male-female relationships—intraracial as well as interracial—are possible only after there is no possibility of progeny. Given the reality of sexism and racism, Walker is asking, is any relationship possible at all?

In the above account, I have tried to show how black women grow in self-knowledge as they take up and throw off various sexual roles. The community, in turn, responds to them in a number of ways. In Janie's case, Joe makes the community view Janie as something special; so it comes to disapprove her quest for a satisfying life as unbecoming to her status. But a reconciliation is implied; Janie is strong enough to come to inform them that black people's triumph over the environment is not in emulating white middle-class values; it is in their turning inward to create hyperbolic lies and ironic jokes; and the community, in the person of Janie's best friend, declares it grows wise by listening to Janie. Sula's community cannot understand her behaviors but tries to limit menace of the unknown by naming her a witch; but because it lacks the spirit of exploration, it finally disintegrates. Motherhood is traditionally held as sacred in Meridian's community; this idea is deeply rooted in her mind; so her rejection of it repeatedly threatens her with a suicidal impulse; its violation is such a strong taboo. She also refuses to accept the docile and subservient positions to which her college and Southern society assign Afro-Americans. She tries to explore her identity by altruistic behaviors; she is at once self-assertive and selfless. Because her self-assertion is supposed to be a masculine act, the community thinks her crazy. ("Because she thinks she's God," one of the villagers comments on her protest, "or else she just ain't all there.") At the same time, they accept her as a saint because they recognize her willingness to suffer for them. Similar things happen to Sula. She wanders around. She jilts men as soon as they become boring. These behaviors seem odd because they are distinctively masculine. Thus, Morrison and Walker seem to point out the absurdity of women's behaviors being called crazy simply because they act like black males.

I have tried to show that female writers are more concerned with intraracial relationships rather than antagonism between black people and white society. In this respect, they are indebted to Hurston. Finally, I have tried to show that all three writers have depicted black communities as a legitimate topic of literary exploration.

Notes

- (1) See, for example, Richard Wright, "Between Laughter and Tears," rev. of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zola Neale Hurston, *New Masses*, 5 Oct., 1937. Quoted by Robert E. Hemenway, *Zola Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. 2nd ed. (1977; rpt. Urbana, Illinois: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1978), p. 241. Also see, Sara Blackburn, "You Still Can't Go Home Again," rev. of *Sula*, by Toni Morrison, *The New York Times Book Review*, 30 Dec., 1973, p. 3.
- (2) Hemenway, p. 330.
- (3) Quoted by Hemenway, p. 11.
- (4) Anne Kirchheimer, "Toni Morrison Has No Limits," *The Boston Globe*, 31 Mar., 1981, p. 23.
- (5) Toni Morrison, "Rediscovering Black History," *New York Times Magazine*, 11 Aug., 1974, p. 14.
- (6) John O'Brien, ed. *Interviews with Black Writers* (New York: Liveright, 1973), p. 202.
- (7) O'Brien, p. 193.
- (8) O'Brien, p. 205.
- (9) Zola Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 5th ed. (1937; rpt. Urbana, Illinois: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1980), p. 41.
- (10) See the above, p. 2.
- (11) *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, pp. 9-10.
- (12) *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- (13) *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.
- (14) *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- (15) *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, p. 172.
- (16) Toni Morrison, *Sula*, 6th ed. (1973; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1980), pp. 77-78.
- (17) *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.
- (18) *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- (19) Alice Walker, *Meridian*, 2nd ed. (1976; rpt. New York: Washington Square Press, 1977), p. 91.
- (20) *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- (21) *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- (22) Alice Walker, "Coming Apart," *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer. (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1980), pp. 101-103.
- (23) *Meridian*, p. 137.
- (24) Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), p. 7.
- (25) *Meridian*, p. 181.

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