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WHAT DO WE DO WITH ZORA? "THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD" AS A "MODERNIST" NOVEL.

Trying to integrate the Black Woman's Literary Tradition into the mainstream of American Literature (read, mostly white and male) has been perhaps as hard as trying to integrate black people in the United States into the mainstream of American Life. The legacy of the "peculiar" institution meant that in many cases the "natural" progression or transformation of Black writing, when in fact it began to be taken seriously, lagged somewhat behind that of "white" literature on both sides of the Atlantic. The reasons for this are fairly obvious. Around the turn of the century the only Black writers who managed to get published with any consistency were those who conformed to the dictamens of white tastes, meaning local color in that "delightful" Black dialect. Paul Dunbar was continuously frustrated in his efforts to be taken seriously and Charles Chesnut finally gave up and went back to practicing law. W.E.B. Dubois and company spent their efforts, both political and literary, seeking recognition and full citizenship and rights for the race.

Oddly enough, the Great War, reference point for the modernist era (1), offered the opportunity for Black males to prove themselves "worthy" of American citizenship by sacrificing their blood for the nation. Black troops fought bravely and well in Europe and were generally accepted as readily as their white counterparts on foreign soil. Thus, while Europeans and white Americans returned home from the War disgusted, disillusioned, and disoriented, the mood among Black Americans was decidedly "upbeat". Having demonstrated to the world that they were as brave and "manly" as whites, surely now they would be accorded the

respect and recognition they so ardently desire.¹

At this point, Alain Locke proclaimed the era of "The New Negro" and ushered in the Harlem Renaissance. Alongside Hughes, Cullen, Cane and other notables of the Renaissance worked Nella Larsen, Jessie Fausset, Anne Spencer, and other women usually classified by male critics as secondary, but the underlying tone of their work is the same. This was a time for hope, not despair. Black literature was still apologist, pleading Black humanity and dignity, but there was a decided tone of optimism and the feeling that this time they would not, could not be refused. The contradiction between hating whites yet aping their lifestyle while proclaiming their disgust at the rude ways of the majority of their own race is one that is only picked up by Nella Larsen (see particularly Quicksand).

Into this literary circle moved Zora Neale Hurston, a "self-made" woman, if ever there was one. Born in the Deep South and brought up in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, having looked after herself since the age of fourteen and having spent ten years procuring an education, Zora arrived in Harlem not only with her powerful intellect but also with a tremendous sense of self-worth and, what is probably more important, self-love. Zora needed no external criteria by which to define herself, much less white people, and her "bodacious" self-confidence at times irked her more refined contemporaries. She was apparently the first to term these literati the "niggerati" in a clear lack of appreciation for their efforts to whitewash their tastes and manners.

Needless to say, she was a most controversial figure, at once delightfully funny in her recounting of folk tales from back home, yet a bit of an embarrassment to Black sophisticates trying their best to achieve acceptance in a hostile society. The bubble that isolated the "niggerati"

from crude reality finally burst with the stock market in 1929, and the ensuing depression was felt hardest at the bottom of the social ladder. Lack of jobs and money only aggravated the race problem, never very far from the surface in the United States, and hopes for the "New Negro" were definitively dashed. It is in this context that I propose we try to understand Black literature's disillusioned break with past forms of literary expression.

The American literary canon here turns to follow Richard Wright and his followers who chose to denounce an intolerable situation via social protest. The result was something very akin to naturalism, though Bigger Thomas' final insistence on taking responsibility for his actions somewhat defies the naturalist mode. (While Ann Petry's Luties of The Street is vanquished in a more "naturalist" story, it is worth noting that in The Narrows and Country Place her message is also one of both personal and collective responsibility.) But just one year before Wright burst upon the scene with Uncle Tom's Children, Zora Neale Hurston had published Their Eyes Were Watching God (2), a love story, of all things, set in the Deep South among the folk characters she so loved and respected. Again Hurston was clearly "out of step" with her times--protest was "in" and accommodation was "out" and a Black writer who concerned herself with a Black heroine in search of selfhood was only asking to be forgotten. And of course, she was, right up until her recent resurrection by contemporary Black feminist writers. So now, in re-evaluation of an undeservedly ignored writer, what do we do with Zora?

I propose here to consider her most famous novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God, as a modernist novel but always within the particular qualifying context of the Black literary tradition. If we can hypothesize that the one overriding characteristic of the modernists was their rupture with the

complacency and illusions of their world as it had been before World War I, then this rupture within Black American literature has to be understood as a break with the optimism of the Harlem Renaissance. Wright, of course, took a completely different tack, yet in Hurston the break, though less "radical" in some senses, is still no less apparent. Their Eyes Were Watching God breaks with the previous era on four different levels: the thematic, the temporal, the linguistic and the symbolic.

It is apparent early on in the novel that Hurston is not in the least interested in Black people's relationship with whites, oppressive or otherwise. The author's only acknowledgement that white people enjoy a "superior" position in society is in Nanny's preoccupation with Janie's future in a world hostile to Black woman (which is why she marries her off to an older man at age 15), and in noting that after the hurricane white bodies are buried in coffins while black bodies are shoveled into ditches. White people scarcely make an appearance in the novel, and ironically, when they do, it is to absolve Janie of Tea Cake's murder even as the Black community clamors for revenge.

At no time does Hurston demand access to a white way of life. What is more, through the figure of Joe Starks she actually condemns the adoption of white patriarchal, bourgeois structures as a model for Black community life. While Nella Larsen uses her protagonist Helga Crane to voice the contradiction between hating whites while wanting to be like them in every way. Hurston demonstrates just how the concepts of materialism as an end in itself, the quest for power and authority to ensure personal gain, and the figure of woman as possession instead of companion not only destroys any meaningful relationship between a man and a woman, but also sows envy and consternation within a community firmly based on solidarity.

While the quest for identity was not a new theme in Black literature (we can easily recall James Weldon's Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man and Nella Larsen's Passing), Janie's quest is much more internal and has nothing to do with being white, as do the previously mentioned novels. This protagonist has always had an intuition of what was important to her, and when the love she yearns for does not materialize in her first marriage, she lets herself be deluded by Joe's promises to set her up as his queen. Once love is lost for the second time, Janie merely internalizes her deception and for the most part quietly accedes to being the mayor's wife and possession. It takes the death of Joe and the appearance of Tea Cake for Janie to let her own needs take precedence and find her selfhood within the context of a love on equal terms.

As regards theme, Hurston is most radical in her concept of woman and again demonstrates a decided rupture with the treatment of women, protagonists or not, of the previous era. Heroines of Black women novelists of the Harlem Renaissance differed from their white counterparts essentially in the fact that they wanted an education and a job (history had taught them they must be prepared to confront all types of adverse situations and that there was not necessarily going to be a man around to help them through economic straits). Yet the essential position of woman within American society is never really challenged and these protagonists conform to the reigning concept of the "ideal woman" for whom the canons were youth, appearance, acquiescence, and domesticity 3.

A closer look at Janie Starks, however, reveals a profound revision in the concept of "woman". In the first place, Janie's acquiescence to Joe's dictates comes to an abrupt end the day she returns his insult as to her age, humiliating him in front of the other Black men, whom he considers to be his "social inferiors". Secondly,

in talking back to Joe she has not kept up the appearance of the obedient, submissive wife which her husband considers fundamental to his own self-importance. Even so, on Joe's death Janie "starches and irons her face" to conform to the grief that is expected of her and continues her life as usual. The only change the town folks notice is that she has taken off the scarf Joe had obliged her to wear and sports her long black hair in one thick braid well below her waist. Nine month later, however, Tea Cake enters her life and Janie abandons any appearance at all of the bereaved widow and behaves like any other woman in love.

The third characteristic of the "ideal woman" at this time was "youth", yet Janie is almost forty when she falls in love with Tea Cake, a man who is a dozen years her junior. From a modern perspective this might not seem so shocking, but when we remember that Hurston published this novel in 1937, the idea that an older woman might find happiness and form a solid relationship with a man in his twenties must have been quite revolutionary. Even today the inverted "winter-spring" marriage is still suspect since the assumption prevails that such a man could only be a pimp or a fortune hunter and the woman a silly dupe.

Janie also throws her image of "domesticity" out of the window when she decides to sell the store and follow Tea Cakes to work "on the muck." To the eyes of the community this is pure foolishness and a definitive reduction in social status. But Janie is tired of doing things "Nanny's way" and is ready to risk losing her security in order to become her own woman. She even readily complies with Tea Cakes's desire that she work by his side in the fields simply because that way they can spend more time together. But then, Tea Cakes has asked not demanded.

Thematically, then, Hurston has broken with

the concept of propriety not only in her selection of characters and subject, but also, and more importantly, with the established criteria for what a proper heroine should be and do.

Hurston also moves in a modernist direction in her conception of the temporal development of the novel. Their Eyes Were Watching God begins with Janie's return to her community after the death of Tea Cake, impervious to the snide commentary she knows full well is going on at her expense. Janie has come into her own, and is totally indifferent to what the townspeople might or might not think, but to Phoebe, her best friend, she accedes to tell her story. Thereafter the novel is chronological up until Tea Cakes's burial, then returning to Janie's conversation with Phoebe in her own house. Again, however, this rupture with the straightforward, chronological novel must be considered within a "Black" context. As is now well-known and appreciated, the Black "literary" tradition for many years was an oral tradition, in part because Black people were denied education and access to literary work, and in part because of their African heritage. Hurston reconciles the two rather ingeniously here by having Janie recount her adventures in her own words and from her own point of view even as she complies with the requisites of the written word. Moreover, this approach allows Hurston a free hand in using her own Black dialect both as a literary style and as an excuse to record the inimitable speech of her own people.

Herein lies the crux of Hurston's third break with her tradition: her treatment of Black dialect. As I mentioned before, various of those Black writers who managed to achieve recognition in the white world of publishing were precisely those who wrote in Black dialect, so on first sight there seems to be nothing particularly notable or radical about Hurston's use of Black dialogue. What is different is the way she approaches her material. While Dunbar, Chesnut and

Hughes (in Jessie B. Semple) all employ Black talk in order to entertain white sophisticates who were "into" Black culture as an exercise in "primitive" experience, Hurston's objective is to faithfully record what she considered to be an incredibly rich form of expression, peculiar to her own race and in many ways vastly superior to the bland form of English spoken by whites.

It is important to remember here that apart from her degree in English, Hurston had done postgraduate work in anthropology with the renowned Franz Boas who, recognizing her intelligence and finely-tuned ear, encouraged her to return to her own native community and record Black folklore, product of which was Mules and Men, published in 1935. In the forward of this book Boas himself credits the inestimable value of the study to Hurston's direct access to the culture.

It is the great merit of Miss Hurston's work that she entered into the homely life of the southern Negro as one of them and was fully accepted as such by the companions of her children. Thus she has been able to penetrate through that affected demeanor by which the Negro excludes the White observer effectively from participating in his true inner life. 4

(The importance of this seemingly obvious observation is thrown into greater relief when she compare her solid research with the controversy recently stirred up over Margaret Mead's studies in Samoa.) Hurston, then, brought to her literary work her training as an anthropologist and her desire to record the speech of her people as precisely as possible. But there is one other biographical fact which influences Hurston's approach and that is the fact that she was "born and bred" in a community in which whites were not present to any great extent. This meant that in her formative years her own growths as a person was never defined by an

external culture, as was the case, for example, of Richard Wright. I personally feel that this is an extremely important point in that the seeds of the self-confidence we cultivate in maturity are firmly planted in childhood.

It is clear from the way Hurston "handles" her language that she has a tremendous respect for the rich idioms, metaphors and capacity for storytelling which are at the command of every member of her community. In fact one of Janie's complaints is that Joe will not let her participate in the "lying" going on on the store porch, while later in the novel, now with Tea Cake, she revels in her own ability to enter into the banter which for her is one of the most defining and satisfying characteristics of her community. Hurston is not writing for the pleasure of whites by any means; she is trying to conserve via the written words a mode of expression which she herself considers to be superior. It is unfortunate that the average student of American literature is not introduced to Hurston because her use of language makes reading this novel a veritable lark, not only for the delightful renditions of Black dialect in the mouths of the townspeople, but perhaps more importantly, for the Black mode of exaggeration, simile, metaphor and personification which permeates the text. For example, at the very beginning of the book the townspeople watch Janie as she returns home:

The people saw her come because it was sundown. The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky...Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive. Words walking without masters;

walking altogether like harmony in a song... (pp.9 & 10).

But when Janie turns to greet them as she walks by, but offers no explanation whatsoever as to where she has been or why she has come in overalls, "The porch couldn't talk for looking" (p.11). Hurston also peppers her tale with Black wisdom, sayings and homilies. Phoebe correctly sums up the situation simply:

You know if you pass some people and don't speack tuh suit'em dey got tuh go way back in your life and see what you do yo'self. An envious heart makes a treacherous ear. They done'heard'bout you just what they hope done happened.(p.16).

Unfortunately these examples don't begin to do justice to the linguistic versatility of the author. But what is very clear is that Hurston was a pioneer in the use of Black style as a serious literary recourse and in doing so broke with her tradition once again.

The fourth level, the symbolic, also distinguishes Hurston from her contemporaries. In emphasizing the "primitive" origins of the Black race, the poets of the Harlem Renaissance looked to Africa for inspiration, the notable exception being Jean Toomer who in his exquisite little book, Cane, drew on the South as symbol, the mother and nurturer of the Black race in the United States. Hurston's images are at once more universal and more personal, and in contrast to some other poets of the modernist era, she is consistent throughout her work.

In Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston through Nanny defines Black women as "the mules of the world", a concept initiated in the title of her book on folklore Mules and Men and continued in her

later work on voodoo which took her to Haiti and Jamaica (5). In her forward to this novel, Sherley Anne Williams, Black novelist and critic, traces the metaphor of woman as mule throughout the story, and how Janie refuses to be confined in this role. Curiously, however, Williams does not mention the episode in Chapter 6 in which some of the men take great pleasure in baiting the old mule which, having a mind of its own, has refused to do what his owner commands any longer. Only Janie is upset:

They oughta be shamed uh theyselves' Teasin' dat poor brute beast lak they is' Done been worked tuh death; done had his disposition ruint wid mistreatmeant and now the got tuh finish devilin' 'im tuh death. (p.89)

In an act of benevolence Joe buys the mule from Matt for five dollars in order to set him free and Janie salutes her husband for his generosity. Shortly thereafter the mule dies and the townspeople stage a mock funeral over which Joe, as mayor, presides. Here Hurston subtly condemns patriarchal society mock veneration of woman in Joe's elegies for a mule that has been the butt of all their jokes. Having had their fun, the townspeople return to their daily chores and leave the "dearly departed" to the buzzards. Mules, like women are of no real consequence in a man's world.

The other constant image in Hurston's novel is the pear tree in whose leaves and branches Janie sees her life unfolding. At fifteen Janie's sexual awakening is symbolized in the "snowy virginity of bloom" pollinized by dust-bearing bee sinking into its sanctum (pp. 23 and 24). This tree-in blossom image is fiercely contrasted with Nanny (who has just seen her granddaughter kissing a young man she considers to be shiftless and no count) "Nanny's head and face looked like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm"

(p.26). Falling out of love with Joe Starks, Janie finds that she is no longer "petal open" with him anymore (p.111) "She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither glistening young fruit where the petals used to be" (p.112). Yet Tea Cake restores her original dream: "She couldn't make him look just like any other man to her. He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom --a pear tree blossom in the spring" (p.161).

The conflict of these two symbols--the mule and the pear blossom-- one negative and one positive--one standing for what woman is and the other for what Janie wants to be-- is a theme deftly woven throughout Their Eyes Were Watching God. Hurston has taken two givens from the Black tradition -- the brute animal to symbolize Black women in the eyes of others, and flowers, plants to stand for the way they see themselves - and has used them to craft the story of a woman's quest for identity in a world that a priori offers none.

These, of course, are not the only symbols that the author uses, but this indicates that Hurston had a rare gift for drawing universal truths out of personal experience. While the writers of the Harlem Renaissance looked for other lands and other times to describe their experience, Hurston looked within herself and her neighbors and drew meaning from her own life and love.

So do we dare call Their Eyes Were Watching God a modernist novel? I rather think that, being the fiercely independent artist that she was, Zora might resent being required to fit anyone else's model. Nevertheless, I venture to say that if the concept of "modernism" is modified somewhat to fit the Black American literary canon, Hurston's rupture with the Black tradition can indeed be interpreted as modernist. On the thematic, temporal linguistic, and symbolic levels this author not

only breaks with her immediate past and her contemporaries, but also anticipates by over thirty years the concerns and techniques of the Black Women Writers' Renaissance. It is my own personal hope that in the near future she will be accorded a slot in the canon of American literature as the innovator she obviously was and that the studies of her work will no longer be confined to courses on Black American women writers.

Notes

1 Although, of course, certain authors were already headed in a modernist direction before World War I, I wish to use this convention here for the purpose explained below.

2 (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1978). All subsequent numbers refer to this edition.

3 Patricia Graham has examined the change in the conception of "the ideal woman" in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth century in "Address upon the installation of Sara Simmons Chapman as Dean of H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College" in Under the Oaks, vol. 8, 1 (Winter 1984), pp.

4 (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), p. 7.

5 See Tell My Horse (Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1981).