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### Black Folk Culture In The Fiction Of The Harlem Renaissance

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This thesis submitted by Judith A. Schreiner in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts at St. Cloud State University is hereby approved by the final evaluation committee:

BLACK FOLK CULTURE IN THE FICTION  
OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

by

Judith A. Schreiner

B.A., California State University, 1968

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Arts

St. Cloud, Minnesota

November, 1978

Dean

School of Graduate and Continuing Studies

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This thesis submitted by Judith A. Schreiner in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts at St. Cloud State University is hereby approved by the final evaluation committee:

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The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's was a period which fostered the development of a black literature that drew heavily upon the black folk culture. Novels representative of this literature are Not Without Laughter by Langston Hughes, One Way to Heaven by Collette Wallen, Home to Harlem by Claude McKay, The Walls of Jericho by Earl Ray Fisher, God Sends Tuesday by Anna Hopkins, and Jonah's Gourd Vine by Zora Neale Hurston.

Various aspects of black folk culture are presented in the fiction. The traditions of minstrelsy are utilized in characterizations of a city dandy and two endears. Dance traditions are represented by descriptions of a cakewalk and a jazz dance. References to the circle dance appear in a presentation of wedding dance and in a discussion of dance traditions and religious customs. The fiction represents the diversity of the spirituals and the haunting qualities of the sorrow songs. The novels reflect various forms of the blues, several traditions associated with blues singers, the instrumentation of the blues. Diversity in blues music is also reflected in the general themes which appear in the fiction.

Elizabeth Van Lint  
Chairperson

Philip M. Keith

Kenneth A. Crea

Characteristics of black religious life are presented in the novels. Physical manifestations and spiritual dimensions of religious life are depicted in detail, and the relationship between religion and magic and the distinction between the two are presented. Rituals associated with the black church are evident in the characterizations of preachers and preaching styles. Preacher-congregation conflicts and style-of-worship controversies also appear in the literature.

The oral traditions of black folktales, proverbs, and beliefs are accurately reported in the novels. The practicality and realism of folk proverbs are apparent, and the presentations of folktale tales express the paragonical functions of the talekeeper and preacher alike. Black language traditions are reflected in the images and unusual word images that appear in the speech of a variety of characters in the fiction.

Lawrence R. Givens

Dean  
School of Graduate and Continuing Studies

## BLACK FOLK CULTURE IN THE FICTION OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

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Characteristics of black religion are well represented in the novels. Physical manifestations and emotional sensations of religious frenzy are depicted in detail, and the relationship between religion and magic and the distinction between good and evil are accurately presented. Traditions associated with the black preacher are evident in the characterizations of preachers and preaching style. Preacher-congregation conflicts and style-of-worship controversies also appear in the literature.

The oral traditions of black folktales, proverbs, and beliefs are accurately depicted in the novels. The practicality and realism of folk proverbs are apparent, and the presentations of folktale materials stress the psychological functions of the trickster and preacher tales. Black language traditions are reflected in the images and unusual word usages that appear in the speech of a variety of characters in the fiction.

Praise of the Harlem Renaissance authors was the forte of Alain Locke, who astutely assessed the unique qualities of the Harlem



Renaissance fiction and who identified the folk culture as the source of that uniqueness. Locke's opinions are supported by the high degree of correspondence between the literary presentations and the actual black folk culture elements.

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Elizabeth S. VanPelt, Chairperson  
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## CHAPTER I

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF A BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

In 1921, Shuffle Along, an all-black musical comedy, appeared on Broadway, signifying the dawn of a cultural awakening. In the annals of black cultural history, the ensuing decade would be known as the Harlem Renaissance, the era of the New Negro, and would be characterized by racial consciousness and racial pride. The black intelligentsia began to define themselves in terms of their own history, culture, and goals. Cultural dualism, previously denied by many black Americans determined to achieve assimilation within the white culture, was accepted as a reality and provided a vantage point from which blacks identified the uniqueness of black culture. In effect, the Harlem Renaissance was the "cultural emancipation"<sup>1</sup> of black Americans, and the literature of the period reflects this cultural freedom.

Obviously, the Harlem Renaissance did not occur in a social, political, or economic vacuum but rather, resulted from a combination of forces shaping its character and influencing its direction. One such force was the social and literary Zeitgeist within the white culture. The Roaring Twenties' generation, in rebellion against their parents' Victorian moral code, enjoyed relative sexual freedom, listened to jazz, danced the Charleston, and drank bootleg liquor. They often abandoned the restraints of respectability for a carefree,

spontaneous, and sexually uninhibited behavior. Ironically, this uninhibited style coincided with a then prevalent stereotype of blacks as exotic primitives, and black Americans and black life became the symbols of freedom from restraints.

White literature of the period reflects this interest in black life and runs the gamut from realistic treatment of black character and theme to characterization of blacks as exotic primitives. Between 1914 and 1924, Eugene O'Neill wrote five plays utilizing black subject matter; three of these plays, The Dreamy Kid (1914), The Emperor Jones (1920), and All God's Chillun Got Wings (1924), are especially significant because they deal with Harlem life, African influences, and racial consciousness. Other well-known works by white writers that reveal the popular primitivistic treatment of black themes are Vachel Lindsay's The Congo: A Study of the Negro Race (1914) and Sherwood Anderson's Dark Laughter (1925). The most famous, or perhaps infamous, portrayal of exotic blacks is Carl Van Vechten's Nigger Heaven (1926). Promoting embittered contention among black literary critics, this novel nevertheless influenced several black writers of the Harlem Renaissance. By the mid-1920's, a few selections by white authors revealed the use of black folk materials for literary characters and themes; Julia Peterkin's Black April (1927), DuBose Heyward's Porgy (1925), and Howard Odum's Rainbow Round My Shoulder (1928) portray Southern black folk in a variety of situations including post-Emancipation plantation life, urban ghetto life, and roustabout life.

White interest in black life would have had little notable

impact on the development of the Harlem Renaissance if it hadn't provided black authors with the key to long-locked doors of publishing firms. Since literary works by white writers presenting black themes and portraying black characters proved to be successful and profitable, publishers were willing to print the works of black writers. Thus, the established existence of a reading audience and access to means of publication provided additional impetus for a black literary movement. It was additional in the sense that, in all probability, the Harlem Renaissance would have occurred without white patronage; for influential forces within the black culture were strong, and such black publications as The Crisis, Opportunity, The Messenger, and the short-lived Fire provided literary outlets.

The first half of the Harlem Renaissance was a period of fermentation as pressures arising from events of preceding years resulted in new concepts and attitudes among the black people. The migration of rural blacks to Northern cities, the disillusionment of black soldiers returning from World War I, the social-political activities of black organizations, and the Garvey movement all contributed to the atmosphere of the Harlem Renaissance.

The migration of blacks from rural areas to urban areas began after the Civil War but reached significant proportions only in the South. The Great Migration, beginning in 1915, altered this rural-to-urban pattern as the urban North became the destination for both rural and urban blacks leaving the South.<sup>2</sup> Climatic and economic factors prompted the migration; exhausted farmland, ravished by erosion and



drought, and the mechanization of the cotton industry steadily undermined the already unstable economic position of Southern blacks while industrialization of Northern cities promised a better way of life. World War I offered the possibility of fulfilling the promise since it encouraged greater industrial growth in the North while it simultaneously decreased the availability of cheap labor by reducing the number of European immigrants. Also, for Southern blacks, the North had a traditional attraction, established during slavery, and race relations in the South after Emancipation had done little to lessen the magnetism of the North. Whatever the individual motivation for migration, the resultant exodus was phenomenal as 1,500,000 to 2,000,000 blacks had left the rural areas for Northern cities by 1930.<sup>3</sup>

In a relatively short period of time, a large number of black folk had become city dwellers, but more than their geographic location had changed. The crowded conditions of the ghetto replaced the isolation of rural living; the standard of living rose above the subsistence level as earning power increased; and educational opportunities came closer to being a reality for many blacks. Feelings of self-reliance and self-respect, new to black folk as a group, were encouraged by the economic and educational opportunities. While congested living conditions were often unbearable by any standard, they did promote intra-group contact which created a strong sense of group identification and an awareness of the collective problems of being black.

A more visible result of the Great Migration was the transformation in the very place that lent its name to the Harlem Renaissance.



Between 1900 and 1920, Harlem's black population doubled and at the same time became cosmopolitan as Africans, West Indians, and American blacks with a variety of backgrounds were drawn to the area. Consequently, a richness of black culture was concentrated in a limited geographical area within the larger milieu of New York City. The proximity of Harlem to the literary, musical, and theatrical center of the country was especially important to young black writers who viewed Harlem as providing a variety of experiences and characters which could serve as literary material and who felt that white interest in black culture promised access to New York's literary groups whose members were successful white authors and publishers.

World War I, a principal cause of the Great Migration, also fostered a social and political assertiveness among black Americans. During the war, many black soldiers found they were accepted and respected in European countries, and their experiences provided a poignant contrast to their lives at home. Furthermore, the war had been fought to safeguard the ideals of democracy and human dignity, but regardless of how real these ideals may have seemed for blacks involved in the world conflict, the unreality of the ideals became very apparent when the war ended and the soldiers returned to their own country. During the first post-war year, twenty-five cities experienced race riots, fourteen blacks were publicly burned, and seventy blacks, ten of whom were soldiers still in uniform, were lynched.<sup>4</sup>

W. E. B. DuBois, in an editorial appearing in The Crisis, expressed the soldiers' sense of injustice:

We are returning from war! The Crisis and tens of thousands of black men were drafted into a great struggle. For bleeding France and what she means and has meant and will mean to us and humanity and against the threat of German race arrogance, we fought gladly and to the last drop of blood; for America and her highest ideals, we fought in far-off hope; for the dominant southern oligarchy entrenched in Washington, we fought in bitter resignation. For the America that represents and gloats in lynching, disfranchisement, caste, brutality and devilish insult--for this, in the hateful upturning and mixing of things, we were forced by vindictive fate to fight also.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, DuBois advocated in strong language that blacks continue to fight for democracy in their own country:

This is the country to which we Soldiers of Democracy return. This is the fatherland for which we fought! But it is our fatherland. It was right for us to fight. The faults of our country are our faults. Under similar circumstances, we would fight again. But by the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that that war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land.<sup>6</sup>

Essentially the rhetoric of militant protest, DuBois' editorial also contributed to the growing racial consciousness and social cohesiveness of blacks by presenting the crimes perpetrated against blacks as group experiences, the feelings of outrage as group feelings, and the solution to the problem as depending upon group action.

Group action was also the emphasis of two black organizations that gained social and political strength during the 1920's; the NAACP, established in 1909, fought and won racial battles in the courts while the National Urban League, created in 1911, worked through social welfare agencies to alleviate housing and employment problems of urban blacks. Both organizations attracted a primarily black middle class membership and received financial aid from white philanthropists, but the achievements of the organizations benefited all blacks.

Furthermore, The Crisis and Opportunity, published by the NAACP and the Urban League respectively, voiced the nationalistic feelings of racial solidarity, pride, and power forming within the black population.

While the NAACP and the Urban League had an aura of respectability, another black organization, with headquarters in Harlem, was generally opposed by the black middle class. Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, boasting a membership of four million blacks by 1923, appealed primarily to the black masses.<sup>7</sup> The principal attraction of the Garvey Movement was not in the "Back to Africa" program, which Charles Johnson assessed as a dream impossible of accomplishment,<sup>8</sup> but rather in the assertion of rejection of a subordinate status for blacks and in the glorification of blackness.<sup>9</sup> The black intelligentsia, though unable to identify with the movement, were still influenced to some extent by Garvey's pride in African cultures; this aspect of the Garvey Movement would appear in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance.

Thus, the background of the period consisted of concepts and events that affected all classes of blacks in some degree and established a racial pride that was the prevailing mood of American blacks during the early 1920's. It would be erroneous, however, to assume that there was a homogeneity in this pride which would unite all blacks in terms of values and goals. On the contrary, racial pride was a catalyst causing a significant disjunction in the black culture. It may be said that a demarcation occurred between the middle class or the elite, including those aspiring to this class, and the lower

class or the masses. For purposes of this study, however, it is more relevant to focus on the middle class for there was disunity here also, a disunity which resulted in two distinct types of black literature and literary criticism during the Harlem Renaissance.

One segment of the black middle class adhered to the values traditionally associated with assimilation. Prior to the Civil War, free blacks, who represented the nucleus of the post-Emancipation middle class, constituted that element of the black population which had achieved the greatest level of acculturation since "their outlook on life and their values were the same as the white models."<sup>10</sup> This desire for assimilation became stronger during the 1920's when the promise of economic and educational opportunities made many blacks optimistic and reinforced their belief in the values and goals of the white culture. For this group of blacks, racial pride was rooted in the achievement of social, economic, and political power, in the refinement of manners and cultural taste, and in the attainment of education, employment, and material goods more often associated with white culture rather than black culture. That this, however, represents a class consciousness, not a racial consciousness, is reflected in the fact that black culture, per se, was rejected by these people. The black middle class insisted that a distinction be made between itself and the black masses, for it was important to demonstrate how vast a cultural distance the black race had traveled since Africa and slavery.

Juxtaposed with the assimilationists was a group of blacks



that Robert Bone, author of the outstanding study The Negro Novel in America, identifies as the "intelligentsia." There were, of course, intellectuals among the assimilationists, but the term "intelligentsia" here applies to a specific group of intellectuals arising in the middle class "when enough gifted individuals have broken with their middle class background to form a community of emancipated intellectuals."<sup>11</sup> Emancipated is the key idea in this definition, for the intelligentsia were no longer slaves to assimilation. If parentage is used as a criterion, the intelligentsia were members of the middle class for their parents were fifty-five percent professionals and forty-five percent white collar workers,<sup>12</sup> but their racial consciousness far outweighed their class consciousness. Racial pride was not based on the white cultural achievements of the black race but on black culture and its unique qualities. The intelligentsia were aware that their cultural heritage was not that of white Americans, and since the black middle class reflected the white culture, the young intellectuals turned to the black folk in search of the collective experiences and traditions that had developed into a unique black culture.<sup>13</sup>

Both the desire for assimilation and the assertion of racial consciousness influenced the literary atmosphere of the Harlem Renaissance. In fact, similar to the split within the black culture, an intellectual chasm developed within the literary movement. On one side of the rift, the assimilationists formed the "Rear Guard";<sup>14</sup> on the other side, the literary intelligentsia coalesced as the "Harlem School."<sup>15</sup>

The Rear Guard were entrenched in the literature of assimilation which had a tradition dating from the Reconstruction era and drawing heavily upon the Romantic tradition in literature. That these writers were extremely sensitive to white opinion is reflected in their novels, which portray characters from the middle class and avoid racial elements in the characterizations. Racial protest was incorporated in the assimilation literature, but it was diluted protest in that it was an appeal, not a demand, for acceptance into the white culture and was based on demonstrating black middle class conformity to white values and norms.

If one were inclined to acrimonious description of the members of the Rear Guard, Richard Wright's assessment should suffice:

[They were] prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America, dressed in the kneepants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people.<sup>16</sup>

In order to demonstrate that blacks had lives comparable to lives of other people, the Rear Guard had to deny the existence of cultural dualism; such denial was manifested in the characters and themes of their novels. The protagonists of Walter White's The Fire in the Flint (1924), W. E. B. DuBois' Dark Princess (1928), and Nella Larsen's Quicksand (1928) are a black doctor, an aristocratic revolutionary, and a college instructor, respectively. "Passing," an extreme denial of cultural dualism since it represents the total achievement of assimilation, is the theme of White's Flight (1926), Jessie Fauset's Plum Bun (1928), and Larsen's Passing (1929).

While the Rear Guard sought to maintain the literary status



quo, the Harlem School was developing a literature reflecting the racial consciousness and racial pride characteristic of the period. These writers were proof that Alain Locke's "New Negro" existed in reality, for they exemplified the "deep feeling of race" identifying the black man who "wishes to be known for what he is, even in his faults and shortcomings, and scorns a craven and precarious survival at the price of seeming to be what he is not."<sup>17</sup>

Langston Hughes, speaking for the black artist in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," expressed this "deep feeling of race" as an intense pride in the distinctive aspects of black culture:

Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing "Water Boy," and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets of Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty.<sup>18</sup>

While challenging the black middle class to see the beauty in blackness, Hughes also articulated the intelligentsia's refusal to be defined in white cultural terms. He asserted that they would define themselves within their own cultural heritage:

We younger 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.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, Hughes insisted that the unique characteristics of the black culture could be discovered among the "low-down folks" who

"furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations."<sup>20</sup>

The purpose of this study is to determine whether or not Harlem Renaissance authors did indeed turn to the black folk culture for literary materials. Hoyt Fuller, a modern literary critic, identifies Hughes' essay as the credo of the Harlem School of writers; therefore, the novels selected for analysis represent the Harlem School: The Walls of Jericho by Rudolph Fisher (1928), Home to Harlem by Claude McKay (1928), Not Without Laughter by Langston Hughes (1930), God Sends Sunday by Arna Bontemps (1931), One Way to Heaven by Countee Cullen (1932), and Jonah's Gourd Vine by Zora Neale Hurston (1934). These later works will more accurately reflect the spirit of Alain Locke's New Negro, published in 1925, as well as Hughes' "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," published in 1926. Obviously, a literary period does not end abruptly, so it is reasonable to expect the continued influence of the Harlem Renaissance for several years after the traditional end of the period; this would be especially true in the four later novels since the authors were deeply involved in the Harlem Renaissance literary movement.

If the fiction is to be analyzed in terms of the presentations of black folk culture materials, clarification of the general referents and origins of that culture is necessary. A non-restrictive definition of culture as learned patterns of behavior and thought is intended herein; this includes the concept of cultural expressions as the language,

art forms and content, institutions, beliefs, values and specific behaviors of a people. In the ensuing discussion, the origins of the black folk culture are assumed to be those identified by Melville Herskovits in The Myth of the Negro Past. Herskovits recognizes the origins of black folk culture as African cultures, the experiences of slavery, and contact with the European culture of white Americans; the resultant culture reflected the retention of Africanisms, the re-interpretation of older cultural forms in terms of new experiences, and the synthesis of African and European cultural elements.<sup>21</sup> The specific characteristics of this culture will be discussed as they relate to the fiction of the Harlem Renaissance. In order to classify the folk culture elements appearing in the literature, it was necessary to decide how specific folk material was utilized in a particular novel. If, for example, references to the folk preacher appeared in adaptations of folktales in the fiction, then these folk preacher references would be included in the discussion of black oral traditions.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, p. 436.

<sup>9</sup> Claxton, p. 104.

<sup>10</sup> W. Franklin Frazier, Black Bourgeoisie (Chicago, Illinois: The Free Press, 1957), pp. 14-15.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Bone, p. 36.

# NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Hugh M. Gloster, Negro Voices in American Fiction (1948; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1965), p. 101.
- <sup>2</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma (1944; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962), p. 183.
- <sup>3</sup> Exact data for migration of Southern blacks to the North are unavailable for this time period. The lower estimate is from Myrdal, p. 192; and the higher estimate is from W. E. B. DuBois, "A Negro Nation within the Nation," Current History, 45, No. 4 (1935), 265.
- <sup>4</sup> George E. Kent, "Patterns of the Harlem Renaissance," in The Harlem Renaissance Remembered, ed. Arna Bontemps (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1972), p. 31.
- <sup>5</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, "Returning Soldiers," The Crisis, 18 (1919), 13-4; rpt. in The Black American: A Documentary History, ed. Leslie H. Fishel, Jr. and Benjamin Quarles, rev. ed. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1970), pp. 410-411.
- <sup>6</sup> DuBois, "Returning Soldiers," p. 411.
- <sup>7</sup> Charles S. Johnson, "After Garvey--What?" Opportunity, 1 (1923), 231-3; rpt. in The Black American: A Documentary History, ed. Leslie H. Fishel, Jr. and Benjamin Quarles, rev. ed. (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1970), p. 433.
- <sup>8</sup> Johnson, p. 434.
- <sup>9</sup> Gloster, p. 104.
- <sup>10</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, Black Bourgeoisie (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1957), pp. 14-15.
- <sup>11</sup> Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 55.
- <sup>12</sup> Bone, p. 56.

13 Nathan Irvin Huggins, Harlem Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 72-73.

14 Bone, p. 95.

15 Bone, p. 65.

16 Bone, p. 101.

17 Alain Locke, "The New Negro," in The New Negro, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc., 1925), pp. 3-18; rpt. in The Negro Caravan, ed. Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969), p. 955.

18 Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Nation, 122 (1926), 692-4; rpt. in Black Expression, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969), p. 263.

19 Hughes, p. 263.

20 Hughes, p. 260.

21 Melville J. Herskovits, The Myth of the Negro Past (1941; rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1958). See p. xxiii for Herskovits' discussion of the retention of Africanisms, p. 297 for his discussion of the re-interpretation of older cultural forms, and p. 298 for his discussion of cultural synthesis.



## CHAPTER II

### BLACK FOLK MUSIC IN RENAISSANCE FICTION

A distinct body of religious and secular black folk music had developed prior to the Civil War, but systematic collection of the music did not begin until after Emancipation. The first published collection of black folk songs, Slave Songs of the United States (1867), contains 144 songs; spirituals comprise the largest part of the material but secular music is also represented by entertainment songs and work songs.<sup>1</sup> During the Reconstruction period, the religious music of the slaves lost many of the folk characteristics as the spirituals became standardized in public performances by such groups as the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Black secular music continued to flourish in the folk form, however, with the development of the blues. Influenced by the spirituals, work songs, and field hollers, the blues took root in the rural South, but traveling roadshows, wandering songsters, and migrating blacks created a complex pattern of dispersion that brought rapid changes in the original folk form known as the country blues. Roadshow performers, applying professional artistry to the country blues, created the classic blues; and blues singers in urban environments, adapting the folk form to reflect the new experiences and sophistication of the city, developed the city blues.<sup>2</sup>



Various aspects and characteristics of black folk music are presented in the Harlem Renaissance fiction, and folk music traditions are adapted as literary devices or techniques of character development. Much of the material is blues related, perhaps reflecting the currency of this folk form at the time of the Harlem Renaissance. Conversely, the older entertainment music is treated in an allusive manner in the literature, appearing in references to black dance and minstrelsy.

The very essence of minstrelsy is caricature. Slaves, performing their songs and dances for white masters and plantation visitors, often presented material that fulfilled white expectations or caricatured white customs and mannerisms. Whites viewed both types of portrayals as humorous and typically black; and by the early 1820's, white entertainers in black face were imitating the caricatures in traveling minstrel shows. After the Civil War, black minstrels began performing professionally; by then, however, the caricatures of the white minstrel shows had solidified as stereotypes:

Blackface minstrels danced and sang; therefore all Negroes danced and sang. Blackface performers were funny; therefore all Negroes were comedians. Blackface minstrels wore very dark make-up with grotesquely painted lips and fright wigs; therefore all Negroes must resemble this image.<sup>3</sup>

A minor character in Claude McKay's Home to Harlem, Strawberry Lips, is described as a "burnt-cork black, who was thus nick-named from the peculiar stage-red color of his mouth."<sup>4</sup> Since there is nothing in Strawberry Lips' behavior to connect him with the minstrel tradition, it appears that the description is intended for other pur-

poses. In fact, McKay uses the stereotype to subtly reveal its dissimilarity to reality. Jake points out that Strawberry Lips is an exception within the general black population:

You might live your life in many black belts and arrive at the conclusion that there is no such thing as a typical Negro--no minstrel coon off the stage, no Thomas Nelson Page's nigger, no Octabus Roy Cohen's porter, no lineal descendant of Uncle Tom.<sup>5</sup>

Jake feels that stereotypical portrayals of blacks fail even as imitations of the exception, for Strawberry Lips is "a type by far more perfect than any created counterpart."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps McKay's use of the stereotypical description is an implicit concurrence with Locke's opinion that the New Negro desires a realistic portrayal of himself regardless of past presentations of what he is supposed to be.

The minstrel tradition developed two main caricatures of blacks: the plantation dandy and the city dandy; in both instances, the performance emphasized the ridiculous in order to amuse a white audience. Arna Bontemps draws upon the tradition of the city dandy to characterize Biglow Brown in God Sends Sunday, but ridicule has no part in the presentation. The city dandy of the minstrel show was a sly, fancy-dressing, smart-talking ladies' man who was very talkative about his sexual conquests. Similarly, Biglow Brown, formerly a minstrel performer, is a gigolo characterized by "loud, sassy" talk and "gaudy" clothes; being the "rage of the fancy-houses," he establishes several sexual relationships and then boasts of his "duplicity."<sup>7</sup> Biglow is by no means a comic figure, however, neither in appearance or behavior. He is physically impressive and charming; he asserts himself with other men; and he dies a violent death. Bontemps

has used the physical aspects and superficial mannerisms of a minstrel stereotype; but the portrayal of Biglow, like the description of Strawberry Lips, denies the validity of the stereotype. Biglow's death is a result of his dandy characteristics, but it is more realistic than the ridiculous, amusing situations his minstrel show counterpart would experience.

A minstrel company could include a variety of dancers, singers, musicians, and speciality acts; but every company had two main comedians traditionally named Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones and known as the "endmen." The show began with a comic dialogue between the endmen and the interlocutor, and the former's ability at repartee usually made a fool of the latter. The dialogue could also take place between the two comedians, in which case the repartee often developed into a comic argument. The traditional source of humor in the antics of the endmen was clever, barbed language, but slapstick jokes and gestures were also used.

Minstrelsy's Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo appear as Jinx Jenkins and Bubber Brown in Rudolph Fisher's The Walls of Jericho. Jinx and Bubber may be described as literary endmen, for their roles reflect their minstrel predecessors' comic routines adapted to function as literary devices. In the minstrel tradition, Jinx and Bubber begin the literary "show" with a dialogue of repartee which is punctuated with a slapstick dance, thus establishing the comedic tone of their relationship.<sup>8</sup> Later verbal exchanges maintain this tone and also reveal the buffoonery of the pair. Facing the possibility of a racial confrontation, Jinx and Bubber remain the clowns:

"Far as I'm concerned," contributed Jinx, "I'm ready now--to run. I been haulin' furniture, and I been haulin' pianos; but when they starts plantin' dynamite, this baby's gonna start haulin' hindparts!"

"Be the first honest haulin' you ever done, too," commented Bubber.<sup>9</sup>

Even a solemn discussion regarding Shine's capitulation to Linda's charms becomes a humorous argument between the endmen over the correct form of the past participle for "smite":

"Smote."

"Smit, I say."

"Listen, squirrel-fodder. When you git a letter in yo' mail what somebody write y', it's wrote, ain't it?"

"You listen, Oscar. When you git a hole in yo' hiney where some dog bite y', you bit, ain't y'?"<sup>10</sup>

The most obvious literary function of Bubber and Jinx is to provide comic relief in tense or serious situations, but Fisher also uses the pair as a means of exposition and transition. The main plot of the novel consists of several subplots which Bubber and Jinx clarify in their introductory dialogue. Each of the first three segments of the novel develops a different subplot, and a scene between Jinx and Bubber precedes or concludes each segment; the technique is abandoned, however, in the fourth segment after the subplots have been woven into the main plot. Although Fisher doesn't develop the characters of Jinx and Bubber beyond the level of minstrel stereotype, he does add a new dimension to the traditional function of the endmen.

In retrospect, the effects of minstrelsy are often viewed with disapprobation due to the negative and persistent stereotypes of blacks that developed. Nevertheless, minstrelsy is part of the black folk heritage that was a source of racial pride for Harlem Renaissance



authors; thus, the positive aspects of the tradition should be represented in the fiction. In Home to Harlem, the very persistence of one minstrel stereotype is viewed as a psychological victory for blacks. A black movie playing at the "Negro Picture Theater" is in the plantation tradition of slaves imitating whites. It is a conscious satire of white mannerisms and expectations, for the black actors "pranced and grinned like good-nigger servants, who know that 'mas'r' and 'missus,' intent on being amused, are watching their antics."<sup>11</sup> The humor in the situation is at the expense of whites, for blacks are laughing at duped whites who are amused by an imitation of "white society people." Not Without Laughter contains an allusion to more tangible results of the minstrel shows: employment for black entertainers and dispersion of black folk music. The musicians, dancers, comedians, and singers in a minstrel show described by Hughes are black; and the musical repertoire is not limited to minstrel songs but also includes ragtime and blues.

Commercialism destroyed most of the folk elements in the black entertainment music exploited in blackface minstrelsy, but the folk characteristics and traditions survived among the slaves. When blacks sang and danced in their quarters or at festivals, the African music traditions could be practiced, one exception being the use of drums which was prohibited by whites. Seventeenth century travelers to Africa stressed that music and dance were the primary forms of entertainment among West Africans, and they described festivals where singing and dancing continued for hours at a time.<sup>12</sup> The tradition of festivals survived during slavery in areas where large assemblies of

blacks were not prohibited; and on the plantations, slaveowners often permitted Saturday night dances or frolics.

During slavery, the field hands and the house servants often attended the same festivals or frolics since caste distinctions barred no one. Similarly, the "bars are down" in The Walls of Jericho, for the General Improvement Association's Annual Costume Ball "is the one occasion in Harlem when everybody is present and nobody minds."<sup>13</sup> Although everyone is admitted, there is a caste distinction in the seating arrangements within the dance hall; lower class blacks are relegated to tables surrounding the dance floor while middle and upper class blacks are seated in upper level boxes that encircle the hall. Perhaps the seating arrangement is a physical representation of the caste system of slavery when "house slaves felt themselves on a higher level than the field hands" and were the "stars" of frolics and festivals.<sup>14</sup> White spectators often congregated to watch the slaves dance, and similarly, although the Annual Costume Ball is a black affair, white spectators are there "to see the niggers."<sup>15</sup>

Traditional aspects of the festival are also evident in the dance competition at the Cotton Flower Ball which Augie attends in God Sends Sunday. Competitive dancing is in the African tradition, and it was reinforced during slavery in dance contests arranged by slaveowners. Slaves appeared in "their Sunday best" to dance for the master who would decide the winner.<sup>16</sup> The cakewalk dominated the plantation dance competition, and the original dance was a simple walk that eventually evolved to include more elaborate steps. Augie, realizing that clothes are a factor in the cakewalk rivalry, dresses



flamboyantly and relies on a simple execution of the traditional dance in order to win the competition.<sup>17</sup>

Juba, a popular black dance throughout the South and the Caribbean, is a competitive dance of original African form. Early descriptions of Juba depict the dance as a challenge dance involving one dancer who performs skillful moves and another dancer, of the opposite sex, who attempts to match the original dancer's skill.<sup>18</sup> McKay describes a Juba-style dance performed by two cabaret dancers in Home to Harlem:

They danced, Rose and the boy. Oh, they danced! An exercise of rhythmical exactness for two. There was no motion she made that he did not imitate. They reared and pranced together, smacking palm against palm, working knee between knee, grinning with real joy. They shimmied, breast to breast, bent themselves far back and shimmied again. . . . Rose kicked. And . . . the boy kicked even with her. They were right there together, neither going beyond the other.<sup>19</sup>

McKay may not have recognized the folk elements in the dance he was depicting, for in all probability, he was describing a contemporary Harlem dance. It could, in fact, be the Big Apple, a popular black dance of the 1920's that Katherine Dunham places within the Juba tradition.<sup>20</sup>

The circle-dance was the prevalent dance form in traditional African dance and reflects the role of audience participation in African music performances. The "audience," moving with shuffling steps, forms a ring while an individual or a couple dance in the center; the audience participates by clapping, singing, and shouting encouragement to the performers. The traditional circle-dance was used in sacred and secular African dance; the dance was retained as the ring-dance in

slave secular dancing, but Protestant ideology, which held all dancing to be sinful, forbade sacred dance among the slaves. Slaves who accepted Christianity, however, did not always discard African religious custom; instead, they reconciled the cultural differences by adapting the African tradition to reflect Christian attitudes. The ring-shout and marching, results of the compromise, retain the circle-dance form and movements but observe specific rules that distinguish religious practices from dancing. In a religious performance, the feet must not be crossed and must not be lifted from the ground;<sup>21</sup> violation of either of these rules constitutes a sin.

Countee Cullen's One Way to Heaven contains an allusion to the Africanisms surviving in black secular dance; the reference is to the traditional dance form and audience behavior but also includes the concept of dancing as sinful. At their wedding reception, Sam and Mattie perform an improvised dance while the guests form a ring around the dancers and urge them on with clapping hands, tapping feet, and spontaneous shouts.<sup>22</sup> It is significant that Mattie, a devout Christian, dances reluctantly, protesting that dancing "isn't right" for church members. While Mattie suppresses her guilt feelings in order to make Sam happy, Reverend Drummond and Mattie's Aunt Mandy are not as flexible in their beliefs. The Reverend, "sure there would be dancing," leaves immediately after performing the marriage ceremony; Aunt Mandy remains, but she is "scandalized" and closes "her eyes to blot out the abomination" of Mattie dancing.<sup>23</sup>

An explicit reference to the folk traditions regarding religious customs and dancing appears in Zora Neale Hurston's Jonah's Gourd

Vine. John Pearson, a self-ordained preacher, frequently finds himself in the awkward position of having to defend his behavior to the church deacons. On one occasion, he is accused of leading the closing march of a church meeting in a manner that could be construed as dancing. He responds that "grand marchin' ain't dancin'" in the first place; and secondly, his feet remained on the ground since he "never cut uh step." A friend defends John by reminding the deacons that "you ain't dancin' till yuh cross yo' feet."<sup>24</sup>

As a dance tradition and a religious tradition, the ring-shout required a unique religious music; traditional African music would be unacceptable within the context of Christianity, and standard Christian hymns would not be functional as dance music. Since the ring-shout was performed at slave religious services which took place after regular services and revival meetings or on "praise nights" in slave cabins, the slaves were free to improvise; thus, they drew upon African music traditions and Christian hymns to create the ring-spirituals. Improvisation fostered diversity in content, form, and melody. Often, the text was a blend of lines from prayers, the Scriptures, and standard hymns, organized in a call-response pattern of alternating choruses and refrains; the melody of a ring-spiritual, often marked by syncopation, could be an adaptation of a secular song or a standard hymn.<sup>25</sup>

The folk music created for the ring-shout comprises a portion of the spirituals, which include many haunting adaptations of early slave songs known as sorrow songs. DuBois, who heard "the voices of the past" in the sorrow songs, describes the characteristic content of the music as trouble and strife; yet he feels the songs "grope toward

some unseen power and sigh for rest in the End."<sup>26</sup> DuBois emphasizes that hope or faith is also present in the songs: "Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond."<sup>27</sup>

The diversity of the spirituals is functional since it provides a means of expressing a variety of moods and circumstances. Sam, a professional religious-convert in One Way to Heaven, is emotionally uninvolved in a revival meeting, yet he is moved by the music and notes the role it plays in the meeting. During testimonial time, individuals frequently sing a spiritual before testifying, and the singer's religious attitude is revealed in the chosen spiritual:

Many prefaced their testimonials with hymns, some in gayly syncopated time that made their hands and the listeners' rush together impulsively, measures that careened through the body, setting their feet tapping and stretching their mouths wide with loud hosannas and amens; while others sang tunes that were sorrowful and heart-disturbing, as if the singers bore the weight of the world upon their shoulders, as if the cross were a very near and personal thing of which they would not rid themselves, nor cared to; as if their very happiness depended upon this very sorrow.<sup>28</sup>

Reverend Johnson, the evangelist conducting the meeting, is "no common preacher" but rather an "artist" who manipulates his flock to salvation, and music is one of his most effective techniques. He establishes the mood of the revival with a "well-chosen" spiritual:

It was warm, irresistible to throat and hands and feet, the sort of song which those who didn't know the words hummed, to which bodies swayed in spiritual syncopation; a sturdy hymn which, when it ended, would not die away in a gurgle, as if it had suddenly been throttled, but which would carry in its wake a ripple of amens and hallelujahs.<sup>29</sup>

At the end of his sermon, when rhetoric has failed to bring any sinners



to the mourning bench and a traditionally "slow, sluggish" hymn has "droned on," Reverend Johnson offers a last invitation in a spiritual of his own composition. The members of the congregation respond to this song, for "they understood it, caught it up, swayed to it, paid it lusty tribute with hands and feet."<sup>30</sup>

The distinction between the spirituals and secular music, especially the blues, could be vague since it was often only the text that differentiated one from the other.<sup>31</sup> This is true of Reverend Johnson's song, which Sam feels would serve admirably as a blues if the lyrics were changed:

If I were you I'd make a change,  
 If I were you I'd make a change,  
 If I were you I'd make a change,  
 Oh, my friend, can't you hear God calling,  
 Won't you make a change?<sup>32</sup>

While a typical blues has a three-line stanza, the Reverend's song has a five-line stanza, but there is a similarity of pattern within both stanza types. In the blues stanza, the second line is a restatement of the first, and the third line is an explanation of or a comment on the first two lines. In Johnson's song, the second and third lines of the stanza are restatements of the first line, and the fourth and fifth lines provide an explanation of the first three lines.

Not Without Laughter presents a variation of the spiritual-blues relationship in a mock-spiritual improvised by Jimboy. Jimboy will play any kind of music upon request, but his preference is the blues. His mother-in-law, Aunt Hager, considers the blues indecent and requests "something Christian from de church." Jimboy, apparently



willing to honor Hager's request, begins to "rock and moan like an elder in the Sanctified Church," tapping his feet and playing a "hymn-like" tune; but the text of Jimboy's spiritual would be more appropriate for a blues:

Tell me, sister,  
 Tell me, brother,  
 Have you heard de latest news? . . . .  
 A woman down in Georgia  
 Got her two sweet-men confused. . . . .  
 One knocked on de front do',  
 One knocked on de back-- . . . .  
 Now that woman down in Georgia's  
 Door-knob is hung with black. . . . .  
 An' de hearse is comin' easy  
 With two rubber-tired hacks!<sup>33</sup>

Jimboy makes only one concession to the typical contents of a spiritual when he ends the song with a drawn-out "Amen."

Aunt Hager's definition of "Christian" music may include standard hymns as well as spirituals, but when she sings, she chooses a song in the tradition of the sorrow songs:

From this world o'trouble free,  
 Stars beyond!  
 Stars beyond! . . . .  
 There's a star fo' you an' me,  
 Stars beyond!<sup>34</sup>

Sandy, listening to his grandmother sing, is moved by the sense of history incorporated in the curious mixture of despair and hope; he hears "a great chorus out of the black past--singing generations of toil-worn Negroes."<sup>35</sup>

Several years later in Chicago, Sandy and his mother, Annjee, hear another sorrow song being sung by "old black worshippers" in a small "Southern church." Sandy is awed by the beauty of the song,

but Annjee comments: "Funny how old folks like to sing that way, ain't it?"<sup>36</sup> The significance of Annjee's remark is in the implication that the traditional religious music of blacks is a remnant of the past. For Annjee, the spirituals are a reminder of her own experiences as the daughter of a devout Christian mother; for a segment of the black population, however, the spirituals are a despised reminder of a collective past they would like to forget: slavery.

During Reconstruction, many members of the growing black middle class rejected the spirituals as "slave" music and insisted that their churches use white religious music in the services.<sup>37</sup> In general, less emotional religious music was characteristic of a black church with services patterned on white religious models, as in a black Episcopalian church for example; but the spirituals were retained in Baptist and Methodist churches where the membership preferred the traditional black religious services. In addition, the minister's relationship with his congregation could have an influence on the kind of music used in his church. A preacher who understood the emotional needs of his congregation would recognize the important role of the spirituals as "manifestations of feeling"; he would also understand that "the arousing of a feeling for the right is a very nearly sure way of having right done."<sup>38</sup>

In view of this dichotomy in black church music, it is understandable that spirituals are sung at the revival meeting Sam attends in One Way to Heaven. The meeting is being held in a traditional black Methodist church, and the music is "elemental Negro religion expressing itself in song."<sup>39</sup> Here the church members take a spon-

taneous part in the service, singing loudly and sharing personal testimonies. The evangelist chooses songs that will inspire the congregation to an emotional demonstration, for he understands his people well enough to know there will be few conversions if there is no demonstration.<sup>40</sup> When his people are slow in responding to his preaching and the music, he uses an improvised blues-spiritual that finally penetrates the congregation's silence and passiveness.

In contrast to the religious services depicted in One Way to Heaven, a description of a black Episcopalian church service in The Walls of Jericho bears almost no resemblance to traditional black worship; as would be expected, spirituals are not a part of the service. Shine, who is not a regular member of the congregation, is not inspired by the music. He feels that the songs lack "pep" and that the choir member who performs a solo has no singing ability; Shine begins to enjoy the music, however, when the entire congregation is allowed to join in the singing.<sup>41</sup> The church members refrain from spontaneous involvement in the services and limit themselves to conventional behavior. Reverend Bruce has no desire to inspire an emotional response in his congregation and addresses the members on an intellectual level; his message is "too deep" for Shine, however, and for others who "no more grasped his message than did Shine."<sup>42</sup>

The desire for assimilation underlying the disparagement of the spirituals also influenced black views of the blues, but the disrepute of the blues often transcended class distinctions. Middle class blacks denigrated the blues as the backward music of illiterate and unsophisticated blacks, and black Christians, regardless of social class, condemned

the blues as "the devil's music that beguiles the listener and leads him to damnation."<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the blues does belong to the common man; he lives the blues, creates the blues, sings the blues, and understands the blues. As an expression of the common man's feelings and experiences, the themes of the blues are earthy and the language is direct. That middle class blacks couldn't understand the blues or didn't want to understand the blues had no significance for the common man. Similarly, warnings of an afterlife in hell, expressed colloquially in Aunt Hager's description of the blues singer being "bound straight fo' de devil,"<sup>44</sup> had little meaning for those who sang the blues. The blues survived in all its diversity, changed to reflect its milieu, spread more rapidly with the advent of recording, and influenced white music to a great extent.

Diversity is characteristic of all aspects of the blues, including form. Paul Oliver employs a classification based on form to identify three types of blues: "twelve-bar" blues, "blues songs," and "jazz-blues."<sup>45</sup>

The twelve-bar form, typical of the country blues, is a six-line structure in the African call-response tradition with a four-line statement and a two-line response, but it may be compressed in a three-line form. Blues logic, an integral part of the traditional blues form, dictates that the response justifies the statement or offers an antithesis to the statement.<sup>46</sup> In Not Without Laughter, Jimboy sings a blues with a six-line form and justifying logic:

O, I left ma mother  
An' I cert'ly can leave you.

Indeed I left ma mother  
 An' I cert'ly can leave you,  
 For I'd leave any woman  
 That mistreats me like you do.<sup>47</sup>

Harriett, interjecting a verse in Jimboy's song, retains the six-line form, but her statement and response represent a confrontation:

Now I see that you don't want me,  
 So it's fare thee, fare thee well!  
 Lawd, I see that you don't want me,  
 So it's fare--thee--well!  
 I can still get plenty lovin'  
 An' you can go to--Kansas City!<sup>48</sup>

Also, a three-line form, with confronting logic in the first verse and justifying logic in the second, appears in Hughes' novel:

Little birds, little birds, ain't you gonna sing  
 this morn?  
 Says, little chirpin' birds, ain't you gonna sing  
 this morn?  
 I cannot sleep--ma lovin' man is gone. . . .  
 It's a mighty blue mornin' when yo' daddy leaves  
 yo' bed.  
 I says a blue, blue mornin' when yo' daddy leaves  
 yo' bed--  
 'Cause if you lose yo' man, you'd just as well be  
 dead!<sup>49</sup>

Blues songs, although related to the twelve-bar blues in character and phrasing, have a couplet-refrain structure. The fixed content, seldom altered by the singer, reflects the influences of popularization, but the songs were frequently included in the country blues singer's repertoire. A "drag blues," described as an "old tune" that is popular in the cabarets in Home to Harlem, is actually a published version of the Hesitating Blues.<sup>50</sup> The song contains a blues theme of unfaithful love but has the couplet-refrain form of the blues songs:



And it is ashes to ashes and dust to dust,  
 Can you show me a woman that a man can trust?  
     Oh, baby, how are you?  
     Oh, baby, what are you?  
     Oh, can I have you now,  
     Or have I got to wait?  
     Oh, let me have a date,  
     Why do you hesitate?<sup>51</sup>

Jazz-blues songs reflect blues content and style adapted for jazz or cabaret performances. Since jazz-blues is influenced by the sophistication of professionalism, it is usually placed in the category of classic blues, but the themes and language will often maintain the country blues tradition. The "sumptuous" and "luxurious" atmosphere of a fashionable Harlem cabaret in Home to Harlem is the setting for a performance of a jazz-blues song. The audience, regardless of its sophistication, responds to the singer's melancholy-defiant style and the typical blues content of the song:

I'm so doggone fed up, I don't know what to do.  
 Can't find a pal that's constant, can't find a gal  
     that's true.  
 But I ain't gwine to worry 'cause mah buddy was a  
     ham;  
 Ain't gwine to cut mah throat 'cause mah gal ain't  
     worf a damn.  
 Ise got the blues all ovah, the coal-black biting  
     blues,  
 Like a prowling tom-cat that's got the low-down  
     mews.<sup>52</sup>

The general classification of the blues as country, classic, or city blues may also be applied to blues singers; such a categorization of singers reflects various traditions associated with a specific type of blues. Traditions of the classic blues and the country blues appear in Not Without Laughter. Traditionally, the classic blues singer was a woman who began her career with traveling roadshows where

performance conditions required that the singer have a hard, powerful voice and a versatile repertoire.<sup>53</sup> It is this tradition that Harriett represents. She has experienced "hard times" touring small towns before achieving any degree of success; she has a harshness in her voice that she herself feels is characteristic of the best blues singers; and she includes jazz, popular songs, and country blues in her repertoire.<sup>54</sup>

Jimboy also sings a variety of song types: "old Southern songs, the popular rag-time ditties, and the hundreds of varying verses of the blues."<sup>55</sup> Jimboy is not a professional, however, but an amateur in the country blues tradition of the wandering songster who had musical talent and who gained a local reputation in small black communities of the South.<sup>56</sup>

The blues began as a vocal music, and after instrumental accompaniment was introduced, the vocal qualities of the instrumentation were stressed. There are four members of Benbow's Famous Kansas City Band in Not Without Laughter, and all the instruments are used in the blues tradition of imitating the human voice in sound and quality. The instruments say "very weary things in a loud and brassy manner"; the cornet laughs "with terrible rudeness," and the drums "giggle" while the banjo whines "an insulting leer." The improvising piano, guiding the other instruments, repeatedly beats out: "St. Louis! That big old dirty town where the Mississippi's deep and wide, deep and wide."<sup>57</sup> Hughes' depiction of Jimboy is closer to the folk tradition in that Jimboy's blues are accompanied only by a guitar, a popular instrument among blues artists since it could be used to simulate vocal qualities.

The imitative range of the instrument could be increased by drawing a knife blade along the strings to produce a whining sound similar to a human cry;<sup>58</sup> this technique is used by Jimboy to elicit "weird croons and sighs" from his guitar.<sup>59</sup>

As the expression of an individual blues singer, the blues must present themes of a personal nature, but there is some restriction on the scope of the themes since the blues reflects the experiences of a larger group to which the blues singer belongs. Classification of the themes appearing in blues may identify specific themes, such as unfaithful love or unrequited love; the themes may be generally categorized by type also, such as self-pity or bitter misery. Paul Oliver applies both methods of classification in The Meaning of the Blues and The Blues Tradition, and his analyses are relevant to the Harlem Renaissance fiction since specific references to the content of the blues as well as literary adaptations of more general blues themes appear in the literature.

The majority of blues verses appearing in the fiction reveal themes related to love and reflect the preponderance of such themes in authentic blues. There are lamentations for departed lovers:

O, don't you leave me here.  
Babe, don't you leave me here.<sup>60</sup>

---

My heart is breakin'--ma baby's gone away.<sup>61</sup>

---

Lawd, I hate to see de evenin' sun go down,  
'Cause de man I love done lef' dis town.<sup>62</sup>

and threats of imminent departure:

You gonna wake up some mawnin'  
 An' turn yo' smilin' face.  
 Look at yo' sweetie's pillow--  
 An' find an' empty place!<sup>63</sup>

---

If you don't believe I'm leavin'  
 Count de days I'm gone.<sup>64</sup>

Some lovers may passively accept the pain of rejection or mistreatment:

I wonder where ma easy rider's gone?  
 He done left me, put ma new gold watch in pawn.<sup>65</sup>

---

If you don't b'lieve I love you  
 Look whut a fool I been.<sup>66</sup>

while others protect themselves emotionally with defiance or cynicism:

Ain't gwine to break mah heart ovah a no'-count gal.<sup>67</sup>

---

Can you show me a woman that a man can trust?<sup>68</sup>

Sexual themes in the form of sexual boasts appear in the blues verses presented in the fiction. It may be a subtle boasting that hints at sexual knowledge and experience:

An' tell yo' pretty papa  
 How you want yo' lovin' done!<sup>69</sup>

or implies numerous sexual conquests:

Did you ever see a woman  
 That I couldn't get for mine?<sup>70</sup>

On the other hand, the singer may flaunt his sexual skill:

Babe, yo' windin' an' yo' grindin'  
 Don't have no 'fect on me,  
 'Cause I can wind an' grind  
 Like a monkey round a coconut-tree!<sup>71</sup>

or pay tribute to a partner's sexual prowess:

See, pretty papa, pretty papa, look whut you  
have done,  
You made yo' mamma love you, now yo' woman's  
come.<sup>72</sup>

The blues developed during a period of heavy black migration, and the theme of traveling is prevalent in the music. Augie sings a blues with a travel theme that Paul Oliver identifies as significant. No matter how strong a man's desire to leave a particular place, he may still find it difficult to go; thus, he bargains with himself, promising to leave if his life doesn't improve:

Feelin' tomorrow lak I feel today,  
Feelin' tomorrow jes' lak I feel today,  
Gonna pack up ma trunk an' make ma get-away.<sup>73</sup>

When he does decide to go, the railroad is most often the means of travel; this idea appears in Jimboy's traveling blues:

Kansas City Southern!  
I mean de W. & A.!  
I'm gonna ride de first train  
I catch goin' out ma way.<sup>74</sup>

Once he has decided to leave, he will act on his decision, traveling on foot if he has no money:

But I ain't got no railroad fare!  
I'm gwine to pack ma grip an'  
Beat ma way away from here!<sup>75</sup>

Compulsive travel, often without a clearly defined motivation or a specific destination, appears as a general theme in four of the Harlem Renaissance novels. In God Sends Sunday, Augie's need to travel may be related to a feeling of being trapped, for he claims he's going North since "this heah town done shrunk up an' got too little for me."<sup>76</sup> When Augie finally leaves New Orleans, he wanders for twelve years,



stopping in numerous places for various lengths of time, and he evidently chooses his destinations in a haphazard manner: "Standing between the tracks, he gazed first in one direction and then in the other. Both seemed alike from where he stood."<sup>77</sup> Sam, the protagonist of One Way to Heaven, also spends years on the road, but he has a specific destination: Harlem. Sam calls himself a "travelin' man," a man who enjoys a leisurely journey, "dallying on the way, making love and turning tricks, settling here and there for a month or two."<sup>78</sup> Jake, in Home to Harlem, enjoys the excitement of new places, so he's always ready to move on to "any place."<sup>79</sup> There seems to be little enjoyment in the traveling Jimboy does in Not Without Laughter, for he is driven by a desperation which Jimboy himself explains: "He'd been born running . . . and had run ever since."<sup>80</sup> As much as he loves his wife and son, he can not stay with them for any great length of time but must go "'cause his travellin' blues done come on."<sup>81</sup>

The general theme of sexual aggressiveness may take several forms in the blues; two variations of this theme are expressions of brutality with sexual implications and verbal abuse with sexual references.<sup>82</sup> The recipient of sexual brutality in the blues is frequently a man's wife or his "woman." The content of authentic blues implies that the aggressor may be motivated by a concept of masculinity which obligates him to assert his physical power:

To keep your wife boys, you gotta mash her cream  
with a brick.<sup>83</sup>

---

Now I'm goin' to get me a picket, right off-a my  
back fence

And I'm go'n whup my woman clean until she learn  
some sense.<sup>84</sup>

The brutality may also be a means of relieving frustration:

If your wife gets hungry boys give her a mouthful  
of fist.<sup>85</sup>

---

Me and the Devil was walking side by side  
I'm goin' to beat my woman until I get satisfied.<sup>86</sup>

There is an indication that the woman accepts and even expects such  
brutality:

Some draw a check, oh babe, some draw nothin' at all  
Well, they don't draw nuthin' they husbands bust them  
in the jaw.<sup>87</sup>

Verbal abuse in the blues occurs in the form of the "dozens." Usually  
directed towards the singer's peers, the abuse is a list of cutting  
insults regarding the recipient's ancestry or his relatives' sexual  
habits:

Adam named everything, I believe he sent you,  
Look like you oughta be up a tree hollerin'  
boo-boo-boo.<sup>88</sup>

---

I like your mama, I like your sister too,  
I did like your daddy, but your daddy wouldn't do,  
I met your daddy on the corner the other day,  
You know about that he was funny that way.<sup>89</sup>

Sexual brutality plays a major role in the characterization  
of Augie in God Sends Sunday. Little Augie, so named for his diminutive  
size, has several methods of making himself "feel like a big  
man"; one such device is the physical abuse of women. When Augie's  
woman, Della, is beaten by another man, Augie is outraged; the cause  
of his anger is not the abuse of Della, however, but the fact that she

received the beating by someone other than himself. Augie, feeling it is a "man's duty" to mistreat his woman, promises Della: "From now on I'm gonna be de one to give you yo' knocks when you needs 'em." Augie's right to brutalize Della plays a curious role in their relationship. Della is a prostitute, but Augie wants her to make a commitment to him; it is not a sexual commitment, however, that Augie describes for Della:

You can stay in de business a lil longer an' sit for de company an' all dat, but nara other man can beat you. Jes' me. I gonna be de one to give you yo' knocks. I means it, an' I don't want no two-timin'. Nobody beats you but me.<sup>90</sup>

Della eagerly accepts Augie's demands as evidence of his love; and when he fulfills his "duty" to her, she is convinced of the intensity of his love.

In Home to Harlem, Rose, also, feels that brutality toward women is a man's duty and a sign of his manhood, but Jake, her lover, never brutalizes her. Rose, disappointed in Jake's failure to be "brutal and beat her up a little," finally elicits the physical abuse she desires by taunting Jake with her infidelity. Rose is elated by Jake's reaction, which she proudly describes to a friend:

He did slap the day-lights outa me. When I comed to I wanted to kiss his feet. . . . Honey, it's the first time I ever felt his real strength. A hefty-looking one like him, always acting so nice and proper. I almost thought he was getting sissy. But he's a ma-an all right.<sup>91</sup>

It appears to be frustration rather than masculine duty that motivates John's physical mistreatment of his wife Hattie in Jonah's Gourd Vine. The ambition and insight of Lucy, John's first wife, had guided John's decisions and relationships with others, especially the

church deacons. When Lucy died, John's influence over his congregation quickly diminished, and a lack of self-discipline in his personal affairs left him vulnerable to criticism. Hattie, whose scheming accounts for a large portion of John's problems with the deacons, continually reminds John of his failures. Although John never abused Lucy in twenty years of marriage, he begins brutalizing Hattie when his frustration becomes intolerable. It is a minor incident, cold coffee, that instigates the first act of violence; but John discovers that he feels better after he severely beats Hattie.<sup>92</sup> As a result, he begins abusing her regularly, provoking a petty argument each time in order to feel justified in beating her "soundly."

The "dozens" is better known as a verbal contest than as a blues tradition, but underlying the verbal abuse in the dozens may well be the traditional African songs of recrimination and the slaves' use of work songs to mock or insult their overseers.<sup>93</sup> The dozens is apparently an old blues tradition, for older musicians, who remember playing the dozens in the early 1900's, describe it as "an ancient insulting blues in which each of the victim's relatives is assigned a disease or perversion."<sup>94</sup> There is some evidence in the blues that the dozens did include the idea of fair play, however, and extremely caustic insults directed towards a victim's family was a violation of the rules for fair play. Don't Slip Me in the Dozen blues deals with fair play in the dozens:

Jones slipped Brownie in the dozen last night,  
 And Brownie didn't think that was exactly right,  
 Because slippin' in the dozens means to talk about your  
     family folks,  
 And talkin' about one's family isn't jokes.<sup>95</sup>

Each player in the dozens attempts to exceed his opponent's clever insults and cause the opponent to become angry. Insulted by a playmate, young Mehaley in Jonah's Gourd Vine is angry beyond the point of verbal retaliation when she cries "Ah don't play de dozens" and physically attacks her opponent.<sup>96</sup> Anger is also Augie's response to insults in God Sends Sunday. As a little man with a great deal of arrogance, Augie is the frequent target for the verbal abuse of other men. Biglow, tall enough to look down on Augie "as on a child," dismisses Augie with "Lil Augie, if ever I got real mad I'd put a lil bitta man lak you in ma coat pocket an' go on 'bout ma business."<sup>97</sup> Augie doesn't return the insult but responds with violent anger, threatening to shoot Biglow. Twenty years later, however, Augie is more adept in verbal abuse. When Lissus calls Augie an "ole" man and implies that his age makes him unable to sexually satisfy women, Augie retorts: "Was I as black an' ugly as you I'd waller wid de hogs 'stead o' 'sociatin' wid folkses. . . . Nuthin' whut's equal to a stray dog could 'bide dat codfish smell o' yourn."<sup>98</sup>

Bubber and Jinx, the comedic pair in The Walls of Jericho, play the dozens on an amicable level, exchanging insults regarding each other's social class until Jinx insults Bubber's family. Jinx's response "is the gravest of insults, this so-called 'slipping in the dozens.'" To disparage a man himself is one thing; to disparage his family is another."<sup>99</sup> Thus, the tone of the verbal abuse becomes serious:

"Mean--my family?" inquired Bubber.  
Jinx dared not recant. "All the way back to the apes," he



assured him "--and that ain't so awful far back."

"The apes in yo' family is still livin'," said Bubber.<sup>100</sup>

The classification of blues forms, singers, or themes will not completely clarify the meaning of the blues, for the blues must be considered a state of mind as well as a music.<sup>101</sup> This is not to say the blues is simply a mood, such as depression or despair; it is more complex and elusive than this. At times, the blues has the status of an "Immanence," an abstract power whose existence is never doubted and whose presence brings the blues as a state of mind.<sup>102</sup> Augie recognizes the blues as a state of mind in God Sends Sunday when he cries "I got de down-yonders, an' I got 'em bad."<sup>103</sup> In Not Without Laughter, Jim-boy is "claimed" by the immanence of the blues when he sings in a voice that is "high and far away, lonelylike, crying with only his guitar, not his wife, to understand."<sup>104</sup> Benbow realizes there is no escape from the blues, for "When de blues is got you, / Ain't no use to run away."<sup>105</sup> There is only the possibility of a brief respite such as that sought by Augie: "Gwine to de river, take a rockin-chair, / If de blues overtake me gwine rock away from dere."<sup>106</sup>

Why a man sings the blues is as enigmatic as the meaning of the blues. Augie sings the blues to drive the blues away, commanding "Go 'way, blues" between verses.<sup>107</sup> Benbow sings the blues in an apparent attempt to destroy the power of the blues, for there is symbolic death in Benbow's music. It is cruel, hard, and violent, "like a giant standing over his bleeding mate"; it expresses "the utter emptiness of soul when all is done."<sup>108</sup> Harriett, on the other hand, sings the blues to remember painful experiences, and she suffers

anew as the blues resurrects the "old pain with an even greater throb than the original ache itself possessed."<sup>109</sup> For Augie and Benbow, the blues offers the possibility of overcoming adversity, either by driving it away or by destroying it; for Harriett, the blues is a means of transcending painful experiences.

The references to black folk music in the Harlem Renaissance fiction are more numerous and detailed than the references to other elements of the black folk culture; this could be a reflection of the fact that black folk music was a familiar cultural expression made popular by minstrel shows, gospel groups, and blues singers. Since the Harlem Renaissance authors were intent upon portraying black folk culture, however, there may be a more significant explanation for the prevalence of black folk music materials in the novels. All of the black folk music is characterized by improvisation, which implies creative and innovative abilities; this aspect of the music is stressed in the literature. Also, it is quite probable that the Harlem Renaissance authors intended to portray the importance of music in all facets of black life.

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2 Paul Oliver, The Meaning of the Blues (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 27.

3 Lynne Fauley Emery, Black Dance in the United States from 1619 to 1970 (Palo Alto, California: National Press Books, 1972), p. 195.

4 Claude McKay, Home to Harlem (1928; rpt. Chatham, New Jersey: The Chatham Bookseller, 1973), p. 63.

5 McKay, pp. 63-64.

6 McKay, p. 64.

7 Arna Bontemps, God Sends Sunday (1931; rpt. New York: AMS Press Inc., 1973), pp. 60-61.

8 Rudolph Fisher, The Walls of Jericho (1928; rpt. New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969), pp. 8-9.

9 Fisher, p. 29.

10 Fisher, pp. 89-90.

11 McKay, p. 314.

12 Southern, p. 8.

13 Fisher, p. 71.

14 Emery, p. 98.

15 Fisher, p. 73.

16 Emery, pp. 91-92.

- 17 Bontemps, p. 79.
- 18 Katherine Dunham, "The Negro Dance," in The Negro Caravan, ed. Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee (1941; rpt. New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969), p. 997.
- 19 McKay, p. 93.
- 20 Dunham, p. 998. Religion, ed. G. Eric Lincoln (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1974), p. 49.
- 21 Southern, p. 161.
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- 23 Cullen, pp. 123-125.
- 24 Zora Neale Hurston, Jonah's Gourd Vine (London: Duckworth, 1934), p. 168.
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- 27 DuBois, p. 261.
- 28 Cullen, pp. 8-9. Tradition, pp. 183-184.
- 29 Cullen, pp. 12-13. African Literature, trans. Oliver Coburn, rpt. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968), p. 167.
- 30 Cullen, p. 18.
- 31 Southern, p. 336.
- 32 Cullen, p. 18.
- 33 Langston Hughes, Not Without Laughter (1930; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), pp. 58-59.
- 34 Hughes, p. 214.

35 Hughes, p. 214.

36 Hughes, p. 324.

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38 John Wesley Work, "What the Negro's Music Means to Him," in The Black Experience in Religion, ed. C. Eric Lincoln (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1974), p. 49.

39 Cullen, p. 13.

40 Cullen, p. 15.

41 Fisher, pp. 179-180.

42 Fisher, p. 183.

43 A discussion of the sources and ramifications of middle class attitudes toward the blues can be found in Paul Oliver, The Meaning of the Blues, p. 331; a discussion of the more general objection to the blues on religious principles appears in Paul Oliver, The Blues Tradition (London, 1968; rpt. New York: Oak Publications, Inc., 1970), p. 23.

44 Hughes, p. 52.

45 Oliver, The Blues Tradition, pp. 183-184.

46 Janheinz Jahn, Neo-African Literature, trans. Oliver Coburn, Ursula Lehrburger (1966; rpt. New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968), p. 167.

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48 Hughes, p. 52.

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51 McKay, p. 36.



- 52 McKay, p. 321.
- 53 Paul Oliver, The Story of The Blues (Philadelphia: Chilton Book Company, 1969), pp. 60-64.
- 54 Hughes, pp. 317-320.
- 55 Hughes, p. 54.
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- 57 Hughes, pp. 100-102.
- 58 Oliver, The Story of The Blues, p. 27.
- 59 Hughes, p. 51.
- 60 Hughes, p. 56.
- 61 Hughes, p. 318.
- 62 Bontemps, p. 56.
- 63 Hughes, p. 103.
- 64 Bontemps, p. 37.
- 65 Hughes, p. 53.
- 66 Bontemps, p. 37.
- 67 McKay, p. 321.
- 68 McKay, p. 36.
- 69 Hughes, p. 50.
- 70 Hughes, p. 51.
- 71 Hughes, p. 51.
- 72 Bontemps, p. 69.

Speculations regarding the origins of the "dozens" appear in Jones, The Meaning of the Blues, p. 151; Oliver, The

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- 74 Hughes, p. 130.
- 75 Hughes, p. 131.
- 76 Bontemps, p. 44.
- 77 Bontemps, p. 194.
- 78 Cullen, p. 3.
- 79 McKay, p. 6.
- 80 Hughes, p. 33.
- 81 Hughes, p. 137.
- 82 Oliver, The Blues Tradition, pp. 254-256.
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- 84 Oliver, The Story of The Blues, p. 109.
- 85 Oliver, The Blues Tradition, p. 65.
- 86 Oliver, The Story of The Blues, p. 119.
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- 88 Oliver, The Blues Tradition, p. 236.
- 89 Oliver, The Meaning of the Blues, p. 152.
- 90 Bontemps, p. 68.
- 91 McKay, p. 117.
- 92 Hurston, p. 209.
- 93 Speculations regarding the origins of the "dozens" appear in Jones, p. 27; Oliver, The Meaning of the Blues, p. 151; Oliver, The

Blues Tradition, p. 236.

94 Oliver, The Blues Tradition, p. 239.

95 Oliver, The Blues Tradition, pp. 237-238.

96 Hurston, p. 46.

97 Bontemps, p. 81.

98 Bontemps, p. 189.

99 Fisher, p. 9.

100 Fisher, pp. 11-12.

101 Oliver, The Story of The Blues, p. 6.

102 Oliver, The Meaning of the Blues, p. 333.

103 Bontemps, p. 173.

104 Hughes, p. 56.

105 Hughes, p. 101.

106 Bontemps, p. 58.

107 Bontemps, p. 37.

108 Hughes, p. 97.

109 Hughes, p. 53.

The significance of the black preacher can not be overstated, for as one ex-slave remarked, "When we had a black preacher that was known,"<sup>5</sup> The preacher's talents were numerous, and his personal magnetism was unusual;

### CHAPTER III

#### FOLK RELIGION IN THE FICTION

"Servants, obey your masters" succinctly expresses the doctrine of Christianity presented to the slaves by white preachers and some black preachers as well.<sup>1</sup> Quite understandably, few slaves accepted this as the gospel. W. H. Robinson, an ex-slave preacher, claimed that "this was not what our people wanted to hear, so they would congregate after the white people retired."<sup>2</sup> In slave quarters, in forests, or in clearings in swamps, slaves took part in their own religious services, developing a distinct religion and establishing an "invisible institution," the slave church. DuBois identifies the unique characteristics of black worship as "the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy,"<sup>3</sup> and participants in the religious services confirm DuBois' observations:

The way in which we worshipped is almost indescribable. The singing was accompanied by a certain ecstasy of motion, clapping of hands, tossing of heads, which would continue without cessation about half an hour; one would lead off in a kind of recitative style, others joining in the chorus. The old house partook of the ecstasy; it rang with their jubilant shouts, and shook in all its joints.<sup>4</sup>

The significance of the black preacher can not be overstated, for as one ex-slave remarked, "When we had a black preacher that was heaven."<sup>5</sup> The preacher's talents were numerous, and his personal magnetism was unusual:

The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a "boss," an intriguer, an idealist,--all these he is, and ever, too, the centre of a group of men, now twenty, now a thousand in number.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, it was the black folk preacher who articulated the informal theology of the black religion and ensured the survival of that religion.

A religious doctrine which emphasized a slave's duty to obey a white master held an obvious attraction for slaveowners since an expected result of such an ideology could be docility and meekness on the part of slaves. The anticipated effect was often achieved when the sermon was delivered by a black preacher who predicated the rewards of the next world on obedience in this world.<sup>7</sup> Slaves who accepted the promise of future rewards developed an attitude of religious fatalism, seizing the "comforting dream" that suffering was a temporal condition to be endured "until the Great Day when He should lead His dark children home."<sup>8</sup> This aspect of the slave's religion appears in the characterization of Aunt Hager in Not Without Laughter. Hager grew up in slavery, yet she criticizes her daughter Harriett for hating whites: "It ain't Christian, chile. If you don't like 'em, pray for 'em, but don't feel evil against 'em."<sup>9</sup> Hager believes "can't nobody help us . . . but de Lawd," so her typical reaction to adversity is prayer.<sup>10</sup> Sandy correctly assesses his grandmother's attitude as apathetic and her view of life as a period of time to be endured: "Maybe it's best not to care, and stay poor and meek waiting for heaven like Aunt Hager did."<sup>11</sup> While Hager's fatalism could be attributed to her age as well as religion, only the latter can account for the attitudes



of Hager's daughter Annjee and Mattie in One Way to Heaven. Annjee, like her mother, leaves "everything in the hands o' God."<sup>12</sup> Mattie is similarly passive; for her, "religion had come [sic] a fatalism, and she was leaving all to the Lord."<sup>13</sup>

In retrospect, black religion and black preachers are frequently criticized for fostering submissiveness in blacks; a broader perspective, however, indicates that pacification was merely one possible result of a slave's acceptance of Christianity. According to Gayraud Wilmore, the religion developed in the slave churches and the free black churches represented a complexity of polarities:

[It] was a religion suffused with a sublimated outrage that was balanced with a patient and boundless confidence in the ultimate justice of God. As the religion of a subjugated and suffering people, it had both positive and negative effects upon those who participated in its cultus. Black religion served, in formal and informal ways, to order and interpret an existence that was characterized, on one hand, by repression, self-abnegation and submissiveness, and on the other, by subterfuge, rebelliousness, and the joyous affirmation of life in the face of tribulation.<sup>14</sup>

Within Wilmore's conceptualization, Aunt Hager is neither an exception to black religious tradition nor is she stereotypical of that tradition.

Wilmore's phrase, "joyous affirmation of life," is discussed by theologian William McClain as a tradition that "encourages responses of spontaneity and improvisation, and urges the worshiper to turn himself loose into the hands of the existential here and now."<sup>15</sup> The concept may, in fact, be synonymous with the "Frenzy" described by DuBois:

It varied in expression from the silent rapt countenance or the low murmur and moan to the mad abandon of physical fervor,--the stamping, shrieking, and shouting, the rushing to and fro and wild waving of arms, the weeping and laughing, the vision and the trance.<sup>16</sup>

God Sends Sunday includes a passing reference to "religious frenzy" in Bontemps' clarification of the quality of a shout heard at a dance.<sup>17</sup> Apparently, Bontemps assumes that the association of spontaneous, emotional response with black religious practices will be supplied by the reader, for he does not elaborate on the phrase.

Whereas Bontemps may be relying upon a stereotype to complete the comparison for the reader, Cullen, in One Way to Heaven, provides a detailed description of the manifestations and sensations of spiritual ecstasy. Cullen avoids the sensationalism of the stereotype, however, and presents an objective account of Sam's experiences at a revival meeting:

[B]enches and chairs had been splintered as men and women, their hands tightly clenched at their sides, braced their feet against the benches in front of them and beat their backs against their own seats with quick frenzied motions like the blows of hammers.<sup>18</sup>

The variety of spiritual expression is evident in Cullen's description of Aunt Mandy:

She could shout with the best in a way that was beautiful to behold, her light, dry body bounding like a small playful animal endeavoring to free itself from a cage; . . . she could sit perfectly still in her pew and let the spirit gradually steal upon her in mesmeric power until she shuddered and twitched and wrung her hands ineffectually, while she uttered strange unintelligible bird-like sounds which she was pleased to call the gift of tongues.<sup>19</sup>

Mattie, a novice in religious frenzy, describes the feelings which prompted her emotional expression, a form of behavior she "used to laugh at":

Oh, it was like nothing I ever felt before. . . . Like fire burning first, and then like ice, or like a knife cutting. Like fingers running up and down my back, fingers of fire and ice. It was like something pulling me out of myself, up from

that bench, although my hands gripped the seat.<sup>20</sup>

Mattie's feelings and Aunt Mandy's behavior could be considered spiritual possession, which is one reflection of the syncretism of African traditions and Christianity that resulted in a black religion.<sup>21</sup>

An intrinsic element of the syncretism was a belief in the existence of the spirit world, or the supernatural, and its ability to interact with the real world; this belief dictated that man must communicate with the spirit world in order to control its effects on a man's life. The conditions of slavery necessitated that any means, be it magic or the Christian God, be utilized by the slaves to communicate with the spirit world.<sup>22</sup> Reverend Johnson, the fiery evangelist in One Way to Heaven, acknowledges the relationship between magic and religion when he addresses his congregation. He feels that his people have "no hunger for the hard bread of reason, but for the soft, easily digested manna of magic," which includes "poetry . . . and song, and all the beaded, miraculous wine of the Bible."<sup>23</sup>

There is a hint of condescension in Johnson's attitude which indicates he may not understand the attraction that magic has for someone like Aunt Mandy whose religion is "a somber coat sumptuously lined with superstition." Aunt Mandy believes in a supernatural world that determines the events of the real world; the individual is not powerless, however, for the supernatural world can be influenced. Aunt Mandy does not distinguish between religion and magic since both are a means of controlling the events of her life. Although she may

pray for "light and guidance," she is not averse to "consulting her cards" in order to obtain "the blessings of Heaven or to ward off, if possible, some celestial chastisement."<sup>24</sup>

In Jonah's Gourd Vine, Deacon Harris bases his belief in "hoodoo" on Biblical references to unnatural powers. He presents a strong argument for Moses being the "greatest hoodoo man dat God ever made." It was not God, however, who taught Moses how to use the power of magic, but rather, it was Moses' Ethiopian wife who "learnt 'im whut he knowed." From this example, Harris generalizes that the "Bible is de best conjure book in de world" and justifies the use of magic to achieve righteous goals.<sup>25</sup>

The influence of African traditions on the slave religion was not always denied by early missionaries, but most frequently the Africanisms were held "responsible for the hysteria, degradation and destructive elements in Negro religiosity."<sup>26</sup> In the opinion of several white missionaries, the slaves' concept of sin represented a degrading deviation from Christian principles of morality. The moral precepts of slave religion were accepted as indications of the slaves' "religious immaturity," their heritage of heathenism.<sup>27</sup> Actually, the slaves' concept of sin can be placed in the context of the African religious tenet of judging the sinfulness of an action by its consequences and not by the action itself.<sup>28</sup> Aunt Mandy's definition of sin, as explained to Sam, reflects this tradition. Sam, assuming that Aunt Mandy's religious beliefs would prohibit the use of cards to foretell the future, asks her if she doesn't think she is committing a sin. Aunt Mandy justifies her actions by making a distinction between her



use of cards to produce "good" and Sam's use of cards for gambling; judged by the consequences, Aunt Mandy's actions can not be considered "evil" while Sam's actions must be labeled "sin."<sup>29</sup> Card playing, per se, is neither evil nor good but possesses the potential for both.

Aunt Mandy's rationalization is in the African tradition of viewing good and evil as attributes of all things. Herskovits associates this tradition with several aspects of black religion, including beliefs regarding the devil. The conventional Christian concept of Satan as mythical ruler of hell and enticer of the potentially damned is not the devil of black religion who assumes the status of a living presence and is a source of enjoyment as well as terror.<sup>30</sup> It appears that the Satan of black religion is a syncretism of Christian dogma and the African belief in trickster-gods, comic-tragic manipulators of man's fate.<sup>31</sup>

Several characteristics of Satan can be identified in Cullen's portrayal of Sam Lucas in One Way to Heaven. Sam is a one-armed trickster who makes his living by shamming religious conversion at revival meetings; the duped church members reward him financially for his dramatic performances and his physical handicap. Ironically, one such conversion results in Mattie's conversion and her emotional involvement with Sam. Sam becomes the controller of Mattie's fate; his dissembling is responsible for both the joy she finds in religious devotion and for the unhappiness she experiences in her relationship with Sam. Sam also manipulates the evangelist Johnson. Even though Johnson is a man of God, he is himself a trickster who resorts to



"dependable tricks" that he knows are "powerful" means of winning sinners' souls.<sup>32</sup> Thus, while Johnson recognizes the fraudulent nature of Sam's conversion from a past encounter with Sam, the preacher does not reveal Sam's deception because the drama of Sam's conversion moves others to conversion. Johnson's silence makes him Sam's accomplice; the preacher does not relish the role but nevertheless acquiesces in it because the effects of Sam's staged conversions are the same effects achieved by the preacher's tricks: souls are saved.<sup>33</sup>

That Johnson's actions may be condemned or praised reflects an ambivalence traditionally associated with the black preacher, "a figure who has been, and remains, one of the most praised and most condemned persons in American society."<sup>34</sup> This points, of course, to the impossibility of describing a "typical" black preacher, but there are certain traditions associated with him that arise from his position in the black culture and from his people's needs.

To be effective, the black preacher must possess a charisma which emanates from personal attributes rather than position or education.<sup>35</sup> The charismatic qualities of the preacher appear in the descriptions of Reverend Johnson in One Way to Heaven and Reverend Bruce in The Walls of Jericho. Johnson's eyes are "bright and hard" with a "zealousness," and he has a powerful voice that reverberates "in rich, clearly-accentuated waves of melody, as if he somehow had managed to reach down and press upward into his throat all the blood and vigor which coursed through his body."<sup>36</sup> Cullen vividly describes Johnson's effect on the congregation:

He made each feel upon his own cheek the flame of the dastardly kiss, speaking with an intensity that caused many to look at their own hands, half fearing to find them red and raw with the marks of nails; for never had the blows of those far-off hammers been so dinned into their ears. When he spoke of the glory of the resurrection, they saw the three women wonder-stricken before the open tomb, at its side the great and ponderous stone rolled away; he recreated for them the angel standing with his sword of petrified fire; in the fervor of his narration, he gave the angel a name, numbered his wings to the count of six, and told what his specific duties were in heaven. He plied the wings of his imagination and floated away as if on a magic carpet.<sup>37</sup>

Fisher's description of Reverend Bruce also emphasizes the impressiveness of the preacher's eyes:

[H]is eyes were deep-set and black, and in them some curious passion gleamed constantly like a flame. As he spoke these eyes engaged everything that might hold a drop of interest, comprehended it, drained it, left it; swiftly flashed from this to that, paused, penetrated, abandoned; sought further, halted, penetrated again, departed--a pair of black wasps.<sup>38</sup>

Bruce's voice is "penetrating like his eyes," and he speaks with "impassioned conviction." It is evident that Bruce is effective, for no one in the congregation "felt the same when Bruce ended as when he began."<sup>39</sup>

Formal education had little to do with the effectiveness of the black preacher; education could, in fact, be a hindrance if the educated preacher did not achieve a balance between "being educated and being like ordinary folk."<sup>40</sup> Reverend Johnson's experience has taught him the importance of preaching to the common man. He is an educated man with scholastic honors as well as a college degree, and he "tried to lift his followers up to him when he first started to preach." He learned, however, that he must "go down" to his people; thus, his text is "no treatise for the learned" but is intended for

the "simple, more naive, unlettered people" in his congregation.<sup>41</sup>

The traditional black preacher was not taught the art of preaching; if a man had oratorical ability, he developed it on his own. Typically, the aspiring preacher imitated experienced and successful black preachers, adapting traditional subject matter to reflect personal style.<sup>42</sup> John Pearson in Jonah's Gourd Vine has a deep, resounding voice and an exceptional talent for extemporaneous prayer. The church elders are well aware of John's talents, but he must take the initiative in developing his preaching ability. In the folk tradition, he imitates the sermons of the itinerant preachers whom he hears while working in railroad camps.<sup>43</sup>

Educated or illiterate, the black preacher had to possess exceptional oratorical skills which would elicit the congregation's oral participation in the sermon. A unique aspect of black worship is the verbal interaction between the preacher and his congregation, reflecting the African traditions of audience participation and call-response.<sup>44</sup> A congregation "talks back" to the preacher, agreeing with him or shouting encouragement to him. If the members of the congregation are slow to respond, the preacher may interject questions or demand that the people respond, for congregational participation is an indication of the preacher's effectiveness and the success of his sermon. Reverend Cozy in Jonah's Gourd Vine realizes the importance of involving the congregation in his sermon, for effective preaching means he will replace John Pearson as pastor of the church. Pearson preaches first and has no difficulty eliciting participation as the "church was alive from the pulpit to the door." Pearson's congregation does not

participate in Cozy's sermon, however. The church members remain silent, ignoring Cozy's exhortations to "Say 'Amen'! Say it lak you mean it, and if you do mean it, tell me so!" A church sister offers a plausible explanation for Cozy's failure when she declares "Dat wan't no sermon. Dat wuz uh lecture."<sup>45</sup>

Apparently, Pearson's congregation wants a preacher in the folk tradition; and if the preaching of Cozy and Pearson are compared, it is evident that Cozy is outside the folk tradition and Pearson is, indeed, a folk preacher. Cozy's text is the "race problem," a subject quite suitable for a black sermon if the context is contemporary,<sup>46</sup> but Cozy discusses only the historical aspects of the subject. Cozy's preaching is bare of figurative language, the one exception being his opening statement "Ah stand before you, handlin' de Alphabets." This image, however, is not an integral part of his sermon but merely a device to capture the congregation's attention, and Cozy surveys his audience "to get the effect of his statement."<sup>47</sup> In contrast, Pearson preaches a traditional selection, the "far-famed, 'Dry Bones' sermon," in which figurative language is incorporated into the entire text of the sermon, not appended as a clever introduction.<sup>48</sup>

Pearson does not always have the support of his entire congregation, and when the conflict within his church is most intense, he preaches a sermon that reflects the tradition of portraying a contemporary moral problem by comparing it with an ancient moral problem.<sup>49</sup> Pearson feels the disunity in his church results from a few members' animosity towards him; thus, he draws a parallel between Christ's betrayal by Judas and his own betrayal by members of his congregation.



The introduction of the sermon establishes the comparison between Christ and Pearson:

But one of you  
Who I have chosen my bosom friend  
That sops in the dish with me shall betray me.<sup>50</sup>

The body of the sermon, a parable that relates the sacrifices of Christ and the consequential benefits to man, extends the analogy between Christ and Pearson.

The poetic quality of the language of black preaching is partially dependent upon repetition, simplicity in sentence structure, and creative imagery.<sup>51</sup> The preacher uses such devices for emphasis and impact, stressing important ideas and phrasing those ideas in a manner promoting remembrance; the effects, however, may also be analyzed in literary terms. Reverend Pearson repeats two phrases in his parable which create a sense of progressive action in the narrative. Pearson is not narrating past events; he is describing actions which he can see "with the eye of faith." Pearson's repetition of "I can hear Him" and "I can see Him" makes the actions real for the congregation.<sup>52</sup> Pearson captures the excitement of the action in a series of simple sentences connected by "and";

And de dynamic powers of nature became disturbed  
And de mad winds broke de heads of de Western drums  
And fell down on de lake of Galilee  
And buried themselves behind de gallopin' waves.<sup>53</sup>

Poetic images, condensed but powerful, are used by Pearson to portray the awesome strength of the natural elements:

And de white-caps marbilized themselves like an army  
And walked out like soldiers goin' to battle. . . .  
And de flying clouds  
Threw their wings in the channels of the deep



And bedded de waters like a road-plow.<sup>54</sup>

and the omnipotence of Christ:

I can see Him step out upon the rim bones of nothing.<sup>55</sup>

---

And [He] placed His foot upon de neck of the storm  
 And spoke to the howlin' winds  
 And de sea fell at His feet like a marble floor  
 And de thunders went back in their vault.<sup>56</sup>

Although the relationship between the black preacher and his congregation may be described as familial, this does not mean the relationship is always harmonious. Controversy, when it does arise, is usually of a personal nature rather than a theological nature.<sup>57</sup> Reverend Pearson and his parishioners are involved in just such a controversy involving Pearson's morals. Married and the father of seven children, Pearson has a lengthy history of extra-marital affairs which are common knowledge among the members of his congregation. The deacons, in an attempt to bar Pearson from the pulpit, arrange a public meeting to confront the Reverend with charges of immorality.

According to Hamilton in The Black Preacher in America, dissension between the black preacher and his church may lead to three typical methods of resolution: the preacher may quietly leave the church and the town; the issue may be settled in the courts; or the preacher may rely on manipulative techniques to maintain his position.<sup>58</sup> The conflict in Pearson's church is a long-standing dispute engendering bitter feelings among influential church members, but Pearson, who is strongwilled, does not resign passively; before the issue is settled, all three alternatives are acted upon. Pearson retains a temporary hold on his authority by preaching a moving resignation sermon. He

presents himself to his people as "jus' uhnother one uh God's crumb-  
blin' clods" and portrays the congregation as "de one dat is so much-  
knowin' dat you kin set in judgement." The ploy is effective; at the  
conclusion of the sermon, he is "roughly, lovingly forced back into  
his thronelike seat."<sup>59</sup> Pearson's victory is not conclusive, however,  
since he overestimates his power and underestimates the strength of  
those desiring his resignation. The issue is not settled; it is  
merely dormant. The conflict gains new force when the Reverend's wife  
sues for divorce on the grounds of infidelity. The preacher's morals  
are then a public issue, and Pearson reacts to the pressure by abdi-  
cating the pulpit and moving to another town.

Within the general black community there exists a larger re-  
ligious controversy which centers on style of worship. Members of  
traditional black churches value folk preaching and congregational  
participation while members of white-style black churches desire re-  
ligious services that include neither traditional black preaching nor  
verbal interaction with the preacher. A distinction between the two  
types of black churches can be made in terms of social class; the  
masses prefer traditional services and preaching, and the middle class  
prefers restrained and unemotional services.<sup>60</sup> The differences may  
also be interpreted in terms of cultural identification and affirma-  
tion; blacks identifying with the black heritage confirm their cul-  
tural past in traditional black worship.<sup>61</sup> Several references to the  
relationship between church membership and social class appear in the  
Harlem Renaissance fiction, but there are implications that cultural  
identification or cultural rejection is also involved.

Constancia Brown, a member of the Harlem elite in One Way to Heaven, leaves the Baptist church for an Episcopal church because "she found the religious ecstasies of the Baptist and Methodist faiths too harrowing for her nerves." Constancia's energy and vivacity indicate this is a facile explanation; more believable motives for her behavior are evident in the self-concept epitomized by her "grand" manner which creates the impression that she is a member of a very elite group "composed of God, the Cabots, and the Lodges."<sup>62</sup> "Racial disturbances or misgivings" are not a part of Constancia's experience, and she views racial consciousness in others as self-consciousness.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps Constancia's membership in the Episcopal church is actually motivated by class consciousness and a denial of her cultural heritage.

In Not Without Laughter, Aunt Hager's eldest daughter Tempy severs her family ties when she achieves middle class status, and she, like Constancia, deserts the Baptists to join the Episcopalians. Tempy justifies her actions on the basis that "too many low niggers" belong to the Baptist church and "de best people" belong to the Episcopal church.<sup>64</sup> Tempy's church membership is merely one of several actions indicating her rejection of black culture; always conscious of the values of the white world, she rejects anything which may be labeled "too Negro." Success, for Tempy, is predicated upon being as "white" as possible:

Colored people certainly needed to come up in the world, . . . up to the level of white people--dress like white people, talk like white people, think like white people--and then they would no longer be called "niggers."<sup>65</sup>

Apparently, it is also important to worship like white people.

The vocal and emotional involvement of the congregation in black preaching has been the object of criticism and condescension that arises in part from a lack of understanding and appreciation for what is transpiring and why it is important to the worshipers.<sup>66</sup> In The Walls of Jericho, Linda implies that the congregation's involvement is evidence of the joy religious worship offers the participants.<sup>67</sup> Aunt Hager, in Not Without Laughter, associates being a "good" Christian with active participation in the sermon, and she criticizes Tempy for joining a church where "a good Christian couldn't shout."<sup>68</sup>

In general, black folk religion is treated in a positive manner in the Harlem Renaissance fiction. Although Hughes characterizes Aunt Hager as meek and Cullen characterizes Reverend Johnson as manipulative, both authors portray the characters as sincere and respected individuals. The fiction emphasizes, without distorting, the personal magnetism of the black preacher, the distinct qualities of the spirituals, and the importance of active participation in the worship service.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Blassingame, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, "Of the Faith of the Fathers," in The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches (1903; rpt. New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), p. 190.

<sup>4</sup> James L. Smith, Autobiography of James L. Smith (Norwich, Connecticut: n.p., 1881), p. 27, as quoted in Blassingame, p. 64.

<sup>5</sup> Norman R. Yetman, ed., Voices From Slavery (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 95, as quoted in Charles V. Hamilton, The Black Preacher in America (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1972), p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> DuBois, p. 190.

<sup>7</sup> Charles V. Hamilton, The Black Preacher in America (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1972), p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> DuBois, p. 199.

<sup>9</sup> Langston Hughes, Not Without Laughter (1930; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> Hughes, p. 219.

<sup>11</sup> Hughes, p. 280.

<sup>12</sup> Hughes, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Countee Cullen, One Way to Heaven (1932; rpt. New York: AMS Press Inc., 1975), p. 182.

<sup>14</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism (Garden



City, New York: Anchor Books, 1973), pp. 18-19.

15 William B. McClain, "Free Style and a Closer Relationship to Life," in The Black Experience in Religion, ed. C. Eric Lincoln (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1974), p. 4.

16 DuBois, p. 191.

17 Arna Bontemps, God Sends Sunday (1931; rpt. New York: AMS Press Inc., 1972), p. 159.

18 Cullen, p. 32.

19 Cullen, p. 53.

20 Cullen, p. 43.

21 Melville J. Herskovits, The Myth of the Negro Past (1941; rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 223.

22 See Wilmore, pp. 20-37, for a discussion of the relationship between the real world and the supernatural, the importance of communicating with the supernatural, and the syncretism of magic and religion in slave religion.

23 Cullen, p. 14.

24 Cullen, p. 54.

25 Zora Neale Hurston, Jonah's Gourd Vine (London: Duckworth, 1934), pp. 211-212.

26 Wilmore, p. 20.

27 Wilmore, p. 17.

28 Wilmore, p. 13.

29 Cullen, p. 58.

30 Herskovits, pp. 252-253.

31 Gilbert Osofsky, ed., Puttin' On Ole Massa (New York: Harper

& Row, Publishers, 1969), p. 36.

32 Cullen, p. 15.

33 Cullen, p. 33.

34 Hamilton, p. 1.

35 C. Eric Lincoln, Foreword, Black Preaching, by Henry H. Mitchell (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), pp. 7-8.

36 Cullen, p. 12.

37 Cullen, p. 15.

38 Rudolph Fisher, The Walls of Jericho (1928; rpt. New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969), pp. 40-41.

39 Fisher, p. 183.

40 Hamilton, p. 188.

41 Cullen, p. 13.

42 Hortense J. Spillers, "Martin Luther King and the Style of the Black Sermon," in The Black Experience in Religion, ed. C. Eric Lincoln (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1974), p. 76.

43 Hurston, p. 156.

44 Henry H. Mitchell, Black Preaching (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), p. 95.

45 Hurston, pp. 228-229.

46 Carol V. R. George, Segregated Sabbaths (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 162.

47 Hurston, p. 227.

48 Hurston, p. 226.

49 Spillers, p. 77.

<sup>50</sup> Hurston, p. 250.

<sup>51</sup> See Mitchell, Chapter VII, "The Black Style," for a discussion of the characteristics of the black preaching style.

<sup>52</sup> Hurston, p. 251.

<sup>53</sup> Hurston, p. 252.

<sup>54</sup> Hurston, p. 252.

<sup>55</sup> Hurston, p. 251.

<sup>56</sup> Hurston, p. 253.

<sup>57</sup> Hamilton, pp. 148-149.

<sup>58</sup> Hamilton presents an extensive discussion of dissension in the black church in Chapter VI, "Conflicts and Criticisms." See p. 153, p. 151, and p. 168 for the respective resolutions cited.

<sup>59</sup> Hurston, pp. 178-180.

<sup>60</sup> Hamilton, p. 220.

<sup>61</sup> Mitchell, p. 43.

<sup>62</sup> Cullen, p. 91.

<sup>63</sup> Cullen, p. 98.

<sup>64</sup> Hughes, p. 24.

<sup>65</sup> Hughes, p. 255.

<sup>66</sup> Mitchell, p. 96.

<sup>67</sup> Fisher, p. 65.

<sup>68</sup> Hughes, p. 24.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE PRESENCE OF THE ORAL TRADITION

It was not uncommon for a white slaveowner to boast that he "knew" the black man--his abilities, his needs, and his thought patterns. The white master's knowledge of the slave was based on his own or other whites' interpretations of black behavior, however, and whites were not aware of the principle of black behavior that is expressed in a black folk song:

Got one mind for white folks to see,  
'Nother for what I know is me.<sup>1</sup>

Slaves' perceptions of the world and their philosophy of survival in that world were not common knowledge to members of the white culture since they were transmitted orally among the slaves in the forms of beliefs, proverbs, and tales. Of this oral material, only a small number of folktales are familiar to the average white American through the Uncle Remus stories of Joel Chandler Harris, and Harris' collections must be viewed as entertaining adaptations of folk materials. In the folk form, the tales, proverbs, and beliefs were an integral part of the slaves' culture, serving to interpret their experiences, control their environment, and transmit appropriate behaviors. Oral folk material did provide entertainment for the slaves, but it also provided knowledge necessary for survival.

Folk beliefs, signs, and conjuring were closely related to the African belief in a supernatural world that interacted with the real world. Within this concept, events were not accidental or random; they were small but meaningful parts of a larger design. Events could be understood if they were considered as the effects of definite causes originating in the real world or the supernatural world.<sup>2</sup> Signs functioned to foretell various effects, conjuring provided a means of changing those effects, and beliefs dictated customary actions which would produce positive effects.

Augie, in God Sends Sunday, believes in signs and conjuring, and his belief does not waver even when he is confronted with contradicting signs. Augie was born with a caul over his face, a sign of lifelong good fortune and clairvoyant powers.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, the latter enables Augie to see a "jack-ma-lantern" which is a sign portending misfortune.<sup>4</sup> The traditional belief states that a person who sees a "jack-ma-lantern" will be compelled to follow the bright light given off by the spirit and that the victim will be led into a swamp or river and will be left there to die.<sup>5</sup> Although Augie does not follow his "jack-ma-lantern" into the swamp, he does not believe he has escaped the destruction signified by the vision; he feels he has merely prolonged the fated journey toward disaster. The contradicting signs create no confusion in Augie's mind, for both signs "fix the course of his life":

Augie believed that he was bound to wander all his natural days, that there would be no rest for him any place until he had exhausted his luck and met the final disaster that awaited him.<sup>6</sup>



Evidently, Augie's belief in both signs is sincere, for he predicates his decisions and actions on those beliefs. While still a child, he leaves home and travels alone to New Orleans, confident that he will overcome all obstacles facing him: "I's hongry, got holes in both ma pockets an' nowhere to go. But I sho is lucky. I was borned lucky."<sup>7</sup> Augie grows to manhood experiencing success as a jockey, a gambler, and a lover; and he repeatedly reminds others of the source and nature of his good fortune: "I was borned lucky. I's borned wid a veil. . . . Anybody whut takes up wid me gets lucky, too."<sup>8</sup> When his luck changes and his horses lose every race and the roll of the dice goes against him, he interprets his misfortune as "an accumulation of bad luck, reserved from many, many days past."<sup>9</sup> He attempts to reverse his luck by carrying a "good-luck 'hand' in his coat pocket and a money 'hand' in his pants."<sup>10</sup> He is unsuccessful, however, and finally surrenders to the destiny foretold by the "jack-ma-lantern." He concedes that his "luck is done gone down" and submits to his fate--wandering for twenty years until the final disaster overtakes him.<sup>11</sup>

Folk beliefs often prescribed the appropriate actions to be performed at important life events. In Jonah's Gourd Vine, the old midwife Pheemy carefully performs the "ancient rites" associated with childbirth. For Lucy's protection, Pheemy buries the after-birth "shoulder deep to the east of the house beneath a tree"; and to assure the good health of the newborn, Pheemy finds some "sheep pills" to make "sheep shadney" for the child.<sup>12</sup> Death is also an occasion that

requires strict adherence to folk customs.<sup>13</sup> When Lucy is dying, her friends turn her bed in an east-west position, with the head of the bed towards the west, and they remove the pillow from beneath her head. Lucy's friends are aware that both customs facilitate an easy death.<sup>14</sup>

One aspect of conjuring provided a means of changing predicted misfortune by employing good-luck charms in the same manner that Augie utilized good-luck "hands" in an attempt to reverse his bad luck, but conjuring could also be used to control other people by means of spells or charms. In most instances, a layman would solicit the aid of a conjure-doctor who was a specialist in magic and charms. In Jonah's Gourd Vine, John Pearson is the victim of conjure employed by Hattie to win his affections; but there is an implication that conjure is also worked against John's wife Lucy to bring on a fatal illness, thus freeing John to marry Hattie. Hattie obtains some "wish-beans" from the conjurer An' Dangle who promises that Hattie will control John if she "stan' over de gate whar he sleeps and eat dese beans and drop de hulls 'round yo' feet"; shortly after Hattie performs this ritual, Lucy becomes ill and dies.<sup>15</sup>

Conjure is a two-edged sword, however, since the person being conjured can turn the "trick" against the person performing the conjure.<sup>16</sup> An' Dangle warns Hattie of this possibility: "Member now, you done started dis and it's got tuh be kep' up do [sic] hit'll turn back on yuh."<sup>17</sup> To avoid this and to guarantee John's affection, Hattie continues to conjure John even after he has married her. When a friend of John informs him of Hattie's activities, the victimized

John ransacks his house and discovers "a miscellany of weird objects in bottles, in red flannel, and in toadskin." Hattie's control over John is broken by another "hoodoo doctor" who uses Hattie's charms to turn the conjure back on Hattie.<sup>18</sup>

Love charms and conjuring may be used to ensure the continuing affections of a lover, or the powers of conjure may be used to regain the affections of a fickle lover.<sup>19</sup> In One Way to Heaven, Mattie relies on prayer and the Lord to keep Sam faithful to her. The practical Aunt Mandy points out, however, that prayer "won't stop a man what's slipping away to other women." Something "quicker" and "more powerful" is needed: conjuring.<sup>20</sup> Aunt Mandy provides Mattie with a recipe for a cake which "would turn wayward feet from any wandering road back to the ways of home, which would change any man, however cold, into the sweetest lover born." Mattie rejects the idea of conjuring Sam until desperation drives her to Madam Samantha to obtain a love charm that will bring Sam back to her.<sup>21</sup>

African oral traditions provided the foundation for an oral tradition among the slaves, and the restrictions of slavery made such a tradition necessary if the knowledge possessed by one generation of slaves was to be transmitted to a descendant generation or to slaves newly arrived from Africa. The practicalities of survival were presented in proverbs and tales which conveyed the essentials of "how to act, how to live."<sup>22</sup>

Practicality and realism are characteristic of the proverbs. In One Way to Heaven, Mattie recognizes the rarity of the pleasure

she finds in her relationship with Sam, and she reasons that the pleasure should be prolonged since that is "better than just swallowing the whole cake today and snuffing ashes tomorrow."<sup>23</sup> Mattie's Aunt Mandy reveals the common sense rationale that underlies her personal belief system when she advises Mattie to see a conjurer; she reasons that "when the angels is too busy to help you, you have to fight the devil with his own tools."<sup>24</sup> In The Walls of Jericho, Shine realistically assesses the risks of an illegal money-making plan promoted by the bootlegger Patmore, but Patmore misunderstands Shine's refusal to take part in the plan. The bootlegger thinks Shine is unable to see the potential wealth in the scheme; Shine corrects the misunderstanding with a succinct statement of the logic behind his feigned "blindness": "They's mo' guys in jail for schemin' than they is for bein' blind."<sup>25</sup> Proverbs appear in Jonah's Gourd Vine in the advice Lucy gives her husband John whose personal life will not bear close examination by the members of the church he pastors. Lucy can accept John's indiscretions but not the openness with which they are committed; therefore, she counsels him that clandestine behavior would be more practical since anyone "kin look and see and tell uh snake trail when dey come cross it but nobody kin tell which way he wuz goin' lessen he seen de snake."<sup>26</sup> She reminds John that he can not judge the mood of his congregation on the basis of its overt behavior, for everyone who "grin in yo' face don't love yuh."<sup>27</sup>

The traditional proverbs include warnings against undue pride and reminders that no one is immune to humiliation. Such proverbs



are not admonitions against self-pride, per se, but are advice regarding the importance of seeing one's self-worth in the proper perspective. In Jonah's Gourd Vine, Lucy quotes proverbs in an attempt to convince John that he is not immune to the public disgrace which will result when his sexual indiscretions are revealed. John is confident, however, that he can anticipate the actions of his congregation and control the church members with his personal and congregational authority. Lucy reminds him that he hasn't lived long enough to know everything when she tells him "youse born but you ain't dead." Furthermore, John may not have a true understanding of his parishioners, for "ignorance is de hawse dat wisdom rides." Lucy also admonishes John for his feelings of superiority and moral immunity by pointing out that "nobody [is] so slick but whut they kin stand uh 'nother greasin'."<sup>28</sup>

Although one purpose of folktales was to function as proverbs by transmitting values and knowledge, still another purpose can be considered as psychological rather than moral. Within the African cultures, folktales were traditionally used to provide a psychological release from societal restrictions and circumstances since symbolic relief from, and assaults upon, authority and power could be portrayed in the tales while the storyteller was protected by the sanctions of ceremony or by the use of innuendo or figurative language.<sup>29</sup> Trickster tales, the primary vehicles for such catharsis in African cultures, also comprise a large portion of the black folktales and include the familiar animal tales and the lesser known tales portraying the slave as trickster. Although it was Rabbit who outwitted Bear or Fox in the



animal tales and the slave John who outsmarted his white master in the human trickster tales, several common elements can be identified in both types of tales:

They placed the same emphasis upon the tactics of trickery and indirection, took the same delight in seeing the weak outwit and humiliate the strong, manifested the same lack of idealization, and served the same dual function which included the expression of repressed feelings and the inculcation of the tactics of survival.<sup>30</sup>

Traditional human trickster tales depict a slave outwitting his master in a variety of confrontations which result in material gains for the slave; more importantly, however, the slave manipulates the master in such a way as to avoid punishment and make the master appear foolish. In Not Without Laughter, the ex-slave Uncle Dan recounts an experience of his youth that contains the essentials of the trickster tale. Uncle Dan and a friend took one of their master's best horses, without the master's permission, and rode it to a dance on a neighboring plantation. While Dan and his friend enjoyed themselves at the dance, the horse, having been ridden to the point of exhaustion, died at the hitching post. By physical force alone, the two slaves dragged the dead animal home and returned it to its stall in the master's barn. The point of Uncle Dan's story lies in the slaves' behavior when "old massa" discovered the dead horse and demanded an explanation of its death; the master's demands were met with feigned ignorance by the slaves. Asked "how dat hoss die all tied up in his stall wid his halter on," the slaves claimed "we ain't knowed a thing 'bout it. No, sah! Ain't none o' us niggers knowed a thing!" Sandy, listening to Uncle Dan's tale, asks the old man if he wasn't scared

when the dead horse was found, and Uncle Dan responds by elaborating on the moral of his story: "Sho, we was scared, . . . but we ain't act like it. Niggers was smart in them days."<sup>31</sup> By acting as if they knew nothing about the horse and therefore had no cause to be afraid, Dan and his friend manipulated their master into a position of impotence and foolishness.

Rudolph Fisher also works with the trickster motif in The Walls of Jericho, but Fisher's tricksters are urban blacks and the dupe is a white philanthropist, Miss Cramp. Motivated by the observation that Linda, her black maid, is different "from most colored people," Miss Cramp feels sure that all blacks could be like Linda if they had "the right sort of help."<sup>32</sup> Attempting to elicit information about black organizations that work "to improve conditions" among Linda's people, Miss Cramp reveals the stereotypes she applies to blacks: they have dark skin and kinky hair; they are intensely religious as a result of slavery; and many are mentally ill, criminals, dope fiends, or fallen women. Linda responds to Miss Cramp's insensitive questioning by feigning naiveté. She suggests that the same organizations which help Miss Cramp's people may also help blacks. Miss Cramp feels this is unlikely, so Linda obligingly describes the work done by the black General Improvement Association, the G.I.A.: "They collect a dollar a year from everybody that joins, and whenever there's a lynching down south they take the dollar and send somebody to go look at it."<sup>33</sup> Miss Cramp feels the G.I.A. is misguided, for they should direct their efforts towards improving conditions "here at home," but Linda points out that such work

is unnecessary in Harlem since "nobody gets lynched here." Throughout this verbal exchange, Miss Cramp remains unaware that Linda is mocking her; believing Linda's simplicity stems from ignorance, Miss Cramp never suspects that "her colored maid would dare make game of her ignorance or play upon her credulity."<sup>34</sup>

Miss Cramp decides the G.I.A. could be "turned to good use in the proper hands," meaning her hands of course, and is determined that she "will help them out." In order to observe firsthand the intended recipients of her charity, Miss Cramp attends the G.I.A. Annual Costume Ball. She is disturbed by the "abandonment" and "unrestraint" she observes among the blacks attending the ball and is relieved to find herself sitting next to Fred Merritt, "whose perfect manner, cherubic smile and fair skin" not only comfort her but also lead her to assume that Merritt is white.<sup>35</sup> Merritt allows Miss Cramp's assumption to stand and encourages the lady in her self-revelations of prejudice and uninformed opinions. Merritt directs the conversation to the topic of housing and discovers that the house he has recently purchased is next door to Miss Cramp's home. Elated and unsuspecting, Miss Cramp elaborates on the exclusiveness of her neighborhood and reassures Merritt that only whites live in the area; Merritt informs her that he "had that in mind" when he bought in that neighborhood.<sup>36</sup> Merritt manipulates Miss Cramp into the awkward and embarrassing social situation of having a black man visit her in her home. Merritt justifies his action as "retaliation" for the numerous times white males have taken advantage of black females.<sup>37</sup> In assuming the role of trickster, then, Merritt

is acting out feelings of anger and frustration; he creates a situation that provides a release for feelings he must normally repress in a white dominated society.

The expression of repressed feelings may also be a function of the many preacher tales which exist in black folk literature and often depict the preacher as a comic figure with compulsive lusts.<sup>38</sup> Such a portrait may reflect an ambivalence, born in slavery and nurtured during Reconstruction, that blacks have toward black preachers. During slavery, the black preacher was not infrequently the white master's pawn; and during Reconstruction, many black preachers aspired to black middle class status, thus aligning themselves with the white culture. In both instances, the actions of the black preacher created a chasm between the preacher and the folk and made the preacher an object of ridicule in the folktale.<sup>39</sup> Reverend Cozy, in Jonah's Gourd Vine, is portrayed as a comic figure when he preaches racial consciousness instead of the gospel. The humor in the depiction of Cozy, however, is not based on the traditional compulsive lusts of the folktale preacher; Cozy is humorous because he presents a serious argument supported with absurd examples. Cozy argues for black pride and implies that such pride should be based on the achievements of famous blacks; unfortunately, Cozy's examples are conclusions based on weak, if not ridiculous, premises. He claims Christ "wuz uh coloured man hisself" and outlines his proof for the congregation: "When he lived it wuz hot lak summer time, all de time, wid de sun beamin' down and scorchin' hot--how could he be uh white man in all dat hot sun?"<sup>40</sup> Cozy argues that Adam "musta



been uh coloured man 'cause de Bible says God made 'im out de dust uh de earth, and where is anybody ever seen any white dust?"<sup>41</sup>

In One Way to Heaven, Reverend Drummond spends an evening entertaining Mattie, Sam, and Aunt Mandy "with story after story." One of Drummond's tales is the anecdote of his first preaching experience when he faced a congregation that "required preaching of the rousing kind." The congregation subjected Drummond to a test that called for real preaching:

The entire congregation greeted him seated with their backs turned away from him. They could not see him. The test required that in order to keep the charge he had to preach so vigorously that by the time he ended more than half the congregation had turned around to look him in the face.<sup>42</sup>

Reverend Drummond is proud that his preaching won the entire congregation; he admits, however, that it was not an easy task: "I ended up with my coat and collar at my feet."

Since black folktales are an oral art form, a portion of their charm resides in the manner of delivery used by the storyteller. In a discussion of the art of black storytelling, Richard Dorson identifies several language devices that contribute to the unique oral style of the black storyteller as "a rich and zesty vocabulary, a striking sense of imagery, some special locutions, and a bold spirit for word usage."<sup>43</sup> Although Dorson's discussion focuses on storytelling, the examples he cites are from everyday speech, so there is the implication that the storyteller's techniques are also a part of the black folk's language tradition; this generalization can be substantiated by considering the language of the blues and the "Fancy Talk" tradition.<sup>44</sup> In the Harlem



Renaissance literature, the distinctive characteristics of the black oral style are evident in the everyday speech of the folk.

Unusual images, frequently conveyed through metaphor or simile, appear in the speech of a variety of characters in the Harlem Renaissance novels. Carefree Augie of God Sends Sunday declares "I's as free of troubles as de palms of ma hands is free from hair."<sup>45</sup> He creates an earthy image when he warns Biglow to leave Della alone: "I ain't fattenin' meat for some other nigger to slice."<sup>46</sup> Augie reveals his sense of humor when he informs a lady friend of how "bad" he is: "I's so bad I hits at maself in de lookin'-glass."<sup>47</sup> In One Way to Heaven, Sam uses a simile based on physical phenomenon to express the casualness of his past relationships with women: ". . . they had come to him easily like water thrown upon a hill that has no other way to run but down."<sup>48</sup> A gambler in Not Without Laughter orders an unusual meal that consists of a "beefsteak all beat up like Jim Jeffries" and a "cup o' coffee strong as Jack Johnson."<sup>49</sup> In Home to Harlem, Jake uses an imaginative variation of the common concept of "two-faced" when he compliments his friend Zeddy: "You . . . nevah did wears you face bahind you."<sup>50</sup> John Pearson in Jonah's Gourd Vine meditates in images when he is thinking about the hostility of his parishioners towards him: "Nobody pushed him uphill, but everybody was willing to lend a hand to the downward shove."<sup>51</sup>

Unusual word usage often results when new words are derived from the sense of the context, when weakly stressed syllables are dropped, or when similar sounding words are interchanged.<sup>52</sup> The first

cause is evident in One Way to Heaven when Sam uses "disremember" instead of "forget,"<sup>53</sup> a usage that also appears in Not Without Laughter when Aunt Hager says she "disremembers what year it were de war broke out."<sup>54</sup> Hager also commits an amusing malapropism when she calls an intensely devout woman a "religious frantic."<sup>55</sup> There is a contextual logic underlying Shine's use of "unscheme" to mean "explain" in The Walls of Jericho, for he uses it in reference to a complicated plot which he doesn't understand.<sup>56</sup> Contextual derivation, dropped syllables, and malapropism could account for Bubber's reference to the church community-house, "where they have dances and basket-ball and ev'ything else they scared to do in d' church itself," as the "immunity-house."<sup>57</sup> If "enter" means "to come or go in," then "entervention" is a logical derivation in Home to Harlem where it is used to mean "intervention";<sup>58</sup> and if "connect" can mean "link together," then "connexidence" could logically be used to mean "coincidence."<sup>59</sup>

Inventive language of individual storytellers contributed to the highly personalized quality evidenced in so many black folktales.<sup>60</sup> It was by no means the only mark of individualism, however, for the material of the tales was subject to adaptations reflecting time, place, audience, and the narrator's relationship to the material. The variety in the tales is indicated in Not Without Laughter, for Aunt Hager has a repertoire of stories that may be limitless and includes "slavery-time stories, myths, folk-tales like the Rabbit and the Tar Baby; the war, Abe Lincoln, freedom; visions of the Lord; years of faith and labor, love and struggle."<sup>61</sup>

Folktales, proverbs, and beliefs are the forms which reflect the oral traditions of the black folk culture; they represent the material most frequently presented in folklore collections. Folk language, once dismissed as non-standard English, has recently been recognized as an important element of the black oral tradition. While the tales, proverbs, and beliefs have been subjected to much analysis by folklorists, psychologists, and sociologists, linguists have just begun to analyze and understand the characteristics and functions of the black language traditions. The Harlem Renaissance authors may have grasped the significance of the oral tradition in black language, for numerous examples of the unique oral style appear in each of the novels selected for this study.

8 Bontemps, p. 63.

9 Bontemps, p. 103.

10 Bontemps, p. 103.

11 Bontemps, p. 113.

12 *Some Black Stories, Auntie's Story Book* (London: Duckworth, 1934), p. 117.

13 Puckett, p. 81.

14 Hurston, pp. 183-185.

15 Hurston, p. 184.

16 Puckett, p. 230.

17 Hurston, p. 183.

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Levine, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> Newbell Niles Puckett, Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1926), p. 336.

<sup>4</sup> Arna Bontemps, God Sends Sunday (1931; rpt. New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1972), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Puckett, pp. 133-135.

<sup>6</sup> Bontemps, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> Bontemps, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Bontemps, p. 68.

<sup>9</sup> Bontemps, p. 103.

<sup>10</sup> Bontemps, p. 105.

<sup>11</sup> Bontemps, p. 112.

<sup>12</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, Jonah's Gourd Vine (London: Duckworth, 1934), p. 137.

<sup>13</sup> Puckett, p. 81.

<sup>14</sup> Hurston, pp. 192-193.

<sup>15</sup> Hurston, p. 182.

<sup>16</sup> Puckett, p. 296.

<sup>17</sup> Hurston, p. 182.

- 18 Hurston, pp. 230-231.
- 19 Puckett, p. 264.
- 20 Countee Cullen, One Way to Heaven (1932; rpt. New York: AMS Press Inc., 1975), pp. 239-240.
- 21 Cullen, p. 256.
- 22 Heli Chatelain, "Folk-Tales of Angola," Memoirs of the American Folklore Society, 1 (1894), 21, as quoted in Levine, p. 91.
- 23 Cullen, p. 133.
- 24 Cullen, p. 239.
- 25 Rudolph Fisher, The Walls of Jericho (1928; rpt. New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969), p. 30.
- 26 Hurston, pp. 165-166.
- 27 Hurston, p. 165.
- 28 Hurston, p. 186.
- 29 Levine, pp. 7-9.
- 30 Levine, p. 131.
- 31 Langston Hughes, Not Without Laughter (1930; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963, pp. 270-271.
- 32 Fisher, p. 68.
- 33 Fisher, p. 66.
- 34 Fisher, pp. 67-68.
- 35 Fisher, p. 105.
- 36 Fisher, p. 128.
- 37 Fisher, pp. 106-108.



- 38 Levine, p. 326.
- 39 Levine, p. 329.
- 40 Hurston, p. 227.
- 41 Hurston, p. 228.
- 42 Cullen, pp. 225-226.
- 43 Richard M. Dorson, American Negro Folktales (New York: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1956), p. 52.
- 44 J. L. Dillard, Black English: Its History and Usage (New York: Random House, 1972), pp. 245-257.
- 45 Bontemps, p. 68.
- 46 Bontemps, p. 81.
- 47 Bontemps, p. 168.
- 48 Cullen, p. 87.
- 49 Hughes, p. 271.
- 50 Claude McKay, Home to Harlem (1928; rpt. Chatham, New Jersey: The Chatham Bookseller, 1973), p. 334.
- 51 Hurston, p. 245.
- 52 Dorson, p. 249.
- 53 Cullen, p. 58.
- 54 Hughes, p. 190.
- 55 Hughes, p. 147.
- 56 Fisher, p. 33.
- 57 Fisher, p. 148.

<sup>58</sup> McKay, p. 47.

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<sup>59</sup> McKay, p. 330.

<sup>60</sup> Dorson, p. 56.

<sup>61</sup> Hughes, p. 189.

between the Harlem School and the Rear Guard also influenced the literary criticism of the period; and by the mid-1920's, the conflict had crystallized with the Rear Guard on the offensive. In a historical perspective, the resulting criticism is important for the precedents it established in criticism of black literature. The Harlem School and the Rear Guard may be literary history, but several principles of their literary criticism are upheld by modern critics, black and white.

It was, at first glance, the "low-down" characters and themes of the Harlem School that offended Rear Guard literary critics and apparently still offend a few recent critics as well. In both instances, the criticism is pregnant with sexualistic judgments. Among other Rear Guard critics, Benjamin Brasley condemned the "sordid, unpleasant, or revolting themes" of the Harlem School and characterized the authors of such works as "coarse."<sup>1</sup> Dubois, although militant in his politics and nationalism, skirted a morally conservative point of view in his review of Claude McKay's first novel: "Home is Harlem for the most part nauseates us, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath."<sup>2</sup> Twenty years

## CHAPTER V

### LITERARY CRITICISM OF HARLEM RENAISSANCE FICTION

As would be expected, the literary rift that developed between the Harlem School and the Rear Guard also influenced the literary criticism of the period; and by the mid-1920's, the conflict had crystalized with the Rear Guard on the offensive. In a historical perspective, the resulting criticism is important for the precedents it established in criticism of black literature. The Harlem School and the Rear Guard may be literary history, but several principles of their literary criticism are upheld by modern critics, black and white.

It was, at first glance, the "low-down" characters and themes of the Harlem School that offended Rear Guard literary critics and apparently still offend a few recent critics as well. In both instances, the criticism is pregnant with moralistic judgments. Among other Rear Guard critics, Benjamin Brawley condemned the "sordid, unpleasant, or forbidden themes" of the Harlem School and characterized the authors of such works as "coarse."<sup>1</sup> DuBois, although militant in his politics and nationalism, expressed a morally conservative point of view in his review of Claude McKay's first novel: "Home to Harlem for the most part nauseates me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath."<sup>2</sup> Twenty years

after DuBois' review, Hugh Gloster voiced a similar opinion regarding McKay's work:

Home to Harlem is painted in exaggerated colors and saturated with libertinism. In his preoccupation with muck and sensual excesses [sic] McKay, like Van Vechten, fails to give a well-rounded picture of Negro life.<sup>3</sup>

Gloster's criticism of McKay's failure to present "a well-rounded picture of Negro life" points clearly to a basic assumption underlying much of the negative criticism directed at the Harlem School. It would be impossible for an author, in one novel, to portray a well-rounded picture of white life, yet Gloster implies this is possible if the literary subject is black life. Since McKay portrays low-life characters and milieu, the criticism appears to be that he fails to portray the black middle class; in other words, respectable blacks, those who have achieved assimilation, should be portrayed. Furthermore, it can be inferred that only respectable blacks should be portrayed since Gloster praises Jessie Fauset's There Is Confusion despite the presentation of one-sided, but respectable, black life. He claims this work "is one of the important novels of American Negro literature"<sup>4</sup> and supports his evaluation by citing William Stanley Braithwaite, an earlier Rear Guard literary critic, who had praised the novel on the grounds that Fauset had "taken a class within the race, given it an established social standing, tradition, and culture, and shown that its predilections are very much like those of any other civilized group of human beings."<sup>5</sup> Thus Gloster's opinion of Fauset's novel appears to rest on the successful portrayal of assimilated blacks and the exclusion of "low-down" characters. The rationale behind this

approach in criticism of black literature was explicitly stated by Nick Aaron Ford who claimed that the literary portrayal of the black race at its "worst" is harmful to blacks;

If the Negro is to rise in the estimation of the world, he must be continuously presented in a more favorable light even in fiction. His ignorance and social backwardness must occupy a small place in public representation, and his virtues must be stressed.<sup>6</sup>

Another tenet of assimilation applied to black literature is revealed by Braithwaite, again referring to Fauset's novel. He praises the work because it comes "nearer to the requirements of art"; that is, it "is incorporated into the body of general and universal art."<sup>7</sup> The implication here is that black literature should adhere to the standards of white literature, for the nearer it assimilates all aspects of white literature, the closer it approaches art. Braithwaite's comments regarding McKay's poetry and Toomer's Cane clarify this aspect of assimilation. McKay's poetry is criticized for its racial content but praised for its use of white cultural referents; while at times McKay uses "his poetic gifts to clothe arrogant and defiant thoughts," he can also be "the pure lyric dreamer, contemplating life and nature with a wistful sympathetic passion." McKay is at his best when "he is full of that spirit and power of beauty that flowers above any and all men's harming," when his "highest allegiance is to Poetry."<sup>8</sup> Toomer, whom Braithwaite praises for objectivity, is actually being lauded for approaching his material with a white point of view:

[I]t is a mere accident that birth or association has thrown him into contact with the life he has written about. He would write just as well, just as poignantly, just as transmutingly, about the peasants of Russia, or the peasants of Ireland, had experience



brought him in touch with their existence.<sup>9</sup>

Braithwaite's comments do not reflect a critical approach that has been discarded, for later critics have clung tenaciously to the idea that the standards of white American literature must be used to evaluate black literature. Nick Aaron Ford insisted that the Harlem Renaissance literature be compared to mainstream American novels of the same period since there could be but one American standard in literature.<sup>10</sup> Ford was demanding that black literature be judged in terms of its conformity to white literary standards of form, style, theme, and language; while this excludes presentations of black cultural elements, it does not necessarily deny the existence of a unique black culture. At least one modern literary critic, however, has expanded upon this aspect of assimilation to effectively include the latter concept also. Nathan Huggins prefaces his analysis of Harlem Renaissance literature with the insistence that it be placed "within the context of American cultural history";<sup>11</sup> he concludes his study by declaring that the idea of a distinct black culture is "a perverse conception," for "the truth was (and is) that black men and American culture have been one."<sup>12</sup>

The Harlem School has not been totally undefended in the arena of literary criticism, but its champions are few and not completely committed in their opinions. While some modern critics are willing to praise the intellectual principles of the intelligentsia, they discuss the literary works in ambivalent terms, hastening to qualify their critical assessments. The forceful language of Alain Locke's earlier

criticism is no longer the diction of literary critics evaluating the Harlem Renaissance literature.

In the 1920's, Alain Locke was the most outspoken defender of the Harlem School. He praised the works of the intelligentsia for an "idiom of style" which he identified as a "flavor of language, flow of phrase, accent of rhythm in prose, verse and music, color and tone of imagery, idiom and timbre of emotion and symbolism."<sup>13</sup> Locke felt that the literary contributions of the young authors were numerous and that among them were

the gift of a natural irony, of a transfiguring imagination, of rhapsodic Biblical speech, of dynamic musical swing, of cosmic emotion such as only the gifted pagans knew, of a return to nature, not by way of the forced and worn formula of Romanticism, but through the closeness of an imagination that has never broken kinship with nature.<sup>14</sup>

Locke claimed the source of these distinct qualities was the black cultural heritage which he referred to as "racial substance."<sup>15</sup>

Although he recognized a distinctive difference between the Harlem Renaissance literature and white literature, Locke placed the Harlem School within the same tradition of realism that was "molding contemporary American letters," thus bringing "the artistic advance of the Negro sharply into stepping alignment with contemporary artistic thought, mood and style."<sup>16</sup> In view of this opinion and also in consideration of white interest in black literature at the time, it is understandable that Locke did not propose that black literature be assessed by any other literary standards than those applied to American literature in general.

Several modern critics concur with Locke's opinions regarding

the influence of black folk culture on Harlem Renaissance literature. It is significant, however, that their analyses do not identify specific cultural elements in the literature. George Kent, for example, claims that Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston used folk materials in their fiction but carries this no further than a reference to forms and traditions.<sup>17</sup> The lack of emphasis on black folk cultural elements reflects an ambivalence on the part of such critics. While they recognize the existence of a unique black culture, they are hesitant to separate black literature from American literature or its standards since, according to Robert Bone, black writers inherited their literary traditions from white authors.<sup>18</sup>

Among modern literary critics, however, there are a number of black critics who demand that white literary standards no longer be applied to black literature. They, like Locke, identify unique characteristics in black writing and explicitly associate these distinctive features with the black culture. Hoyt Fuller argues that the literature of a people can not be separated from the realities of that people's life since "the literature of any people grows organically out of the experience of that people, informed by imagination and wit--the gift, in short, of artistry."<sup>19</sup> Therefore, in order to judge a literature, the critic must use an aesthetic grounded in the culture of the people creating that literature. For black literature, Fuller defines a black aesthetic as "a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of blacks which reflect the special character and

imperatives of black experience."<sup>20</sup> According to Darwin Turner, a literary criticism based on a black aesthetic would evaluate a work in terms of the "presentation of the styles and traditions stemming from African and Afro-American culture"; a work would be judged as "good" or "bad" depending upon the accuracy of the presentation.<sup>21</sup>

In general, black literature prior to the black revolution of the 1960's is judged negatively by black aesthetic critics. Fuller, however, does feel that the Harlem Renaissance writers believed in the principles of a black aesthetic; he contends that all of them but Langston Hughes abandoned or rejected these principles and never actually achieved what they "merely dreamed of doing."<sup>22</sup> When one examines Fuller's comments on the black literature of the 1960's, his opinion regarding the Harlem Renaissance literature can be questioned. He praises black revolutionary writers who seek their subjects and themes in their own folk culture, folk traditions, and their own history; and he provides this description of the essence of the resultant literature:

The new poetry is a poetry of exhortation and celebration, and the new prose is a prose of affirmation. The new literature is characterized by a spirit of rejection--rejection of values that have proven useless or destructive or debasing--but there is no "protest," as protest, in it. And the new poetry is a celebration of blackness.<sup>23</sup>

Forty-five years before Fuller's comments on "new black writers" and their literature, Alain Locke had similarly praised New Negro writers who "dig deep into the racy peasant underoil of race life," speak "out of an unique experience and with a particular representativeness," and create "out of the depths of . . . group and personal experience."



Locke characterized these writers as expressing "instinctive love and pride of race . . . [and] ardent respect and love for Africa." He saw no "wail and appeal" in their works but rather a "challenge and indictment." To the Harlem Renaissance authors, Locke attributed "a new aesthetic."<sup>24</sup>

To equate the "new aesthetic" of the Harlem Renaissance with the "black aesthetic" would be an oversimplification, but Locke's reference to the black writer's use of black folk cultural materials does establish a commonality between the two phrases. It therefore appears that an application of the black aesthetic to the Harlem Renaissance literature would be justified; the findings of this study provide further justification for such an opinion. If the six novels examined herein may be considered as representative of the Harlem School, then there is ample evidence that the black folk culture was a source of literary material for Harlem Renaissance authors; more importantly, the high degree of correspondence between the literary presentations and the actual black folk culture elements supports the conclusion that the novels do reflect unique qualities and values of the black folk culture. The folk material in the novels is not treated in a superficial manner, nor is it a conspicuous exploitation of cultural material to create "race" literature. Not Without Laughter and Jonah's Gourd Vine have rural, Southern settings and describe the common man's experiences and thoughts; as would be expected, the folk culture is central to characterization and plot development. The action of God Sends Sunday is set in the urban South, but the time frame of the novel is the late



nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the characters represent the "sporting class," a subset of the larger group of "low-down" folk. Again, in this novel the folk culture material is integral to the action of the novel and the motivations of the characters. Home to Harlem, One Way to Heaven, and The Walls of Jericho have Harlem settings and portray sophisticated, urban blacks; individual elements of the black folk culture are not pervasive in these works, but the general theme of each novel has a significant relationship to the black folk culture: McKay deals with the alienation and survival of blacks in a white society, Cullen examines the nature and ramifications of black religion, and Fisher emphasizes the importance of the black man's need to define himself.

The significance of the Harlem Renaissance literature lies in the prevalence of black folk culture materials presented in the novels. The authors of the Harlem School were fully conscious of the unique qualities of their culture; at the same time, they were well aware that black literature was not considered an element of black culture since it was viewed as being dependent upon white literary traditions. The Harlem Renaissance authors attempted to establish a black literary tradition separate from the white tradition. They did not interpret black folk culture; they depicted that culture. Thus, they were writing for a black audience, and they utilized expressions, characters, and experiences that would be meaningful for that audience. The direct portrayal of the black folk culture in the Harlem Renaissance literature did much to encourage a pride in black culture and its roots; this added

a new perspective to black literary tradition. The works of later black authors, such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, indicate that the black literary tradition desired by the Harlem Renaissance authors did indeed take root.

<sup>2</sup> W. E. B. Dubois, How to Read the Negro, by Claude McKay, The Crisis, 35 (1928), 222.

<sup>3</sup> Ralph M. Ellison, Black Voices in American Fiction (1948; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1965), p. 164.

<sup>4</sup> Ellison, p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> William Stanley Braithwaite, "The Negro in Literature," The Crisis, 28 (1924), 222.

<sup>6</sup> Dick James Ford, The Contemporary Negro Novel & Study in Race Relations (College Park, Maryland: Potomath Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 90-92.

<sup>7</sup> William Stanley Braithwaite, "The Negro in American Literature," in The New Negro, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc., 1925); rpt. in Black Expression, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969), p. 181.

<sup>8</sup> Braithwaite, "The Negro in American Literature," p. 173.

<sup>9</sup> Braithwaite, "The Negro in American Literature," p. 181.

<sup>10</sup> Ford, p. 90.

<sup>11</sup> Nathan Irvin Huggins, Harlem Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Huggins, p. 309.

<sup>13</sup> Alain Locke, "Negro Youth Speaks," in The New Negro, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc., 1925); rpt. in Black Expression, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), p. 21.

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Brawley, "The Negro Literary Renaissance," Southern Workman, 55 (1927), 178.

<sup>2</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, rev. of Home to Harlem, by Claude McKay, The Crisis, 35 (1928), 202.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh M. Gloster, Negro Voices in American Fiction (1948; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1965), p. 164.

<sup>4</sup> Gloster, p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> William Stanley Braithwaite, "The Negro in Literature," The Crisis, 28 (1924), 210.

<sup>6</sup> Nick Aaron Ford, The Contemporary Negro Novel: A Study in Race Relations (College Park, Maryland: McGrath Publishing Company, 1936), pp. 98-99.

<sup>7</sup> William Stanley Braithwaite, "The Negro in American Literature," in The New Negro, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc., 1925); rpt. in Black Expression, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969), p. 181.

<sup>8</sup> Braithwaite, "The Negro in American Literature," p. 178.

<sup>9</sup> Braithwaite, "The Negro in American Literature," p. 181.

<sup>10</sup> Ford, p. 90.

<sup>11</sup> Nathan Irvin Huggins, Harlem Renaissance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Huggins, p. 309.

<sup>13</sup> Alain Locke, "Negro Youth Speaks," in The New Negro, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, Inc., 1925); rpt. in The Black Aesthetic, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), p. 21

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- 22 Fuller, "The New Black Literature: Protest or Affirmation," p. 357.
- 23 Fuller, "The New Black Literature: Protest or Affirmation," pp. 357-358.
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