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City University of New York PH.D. 1985

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RHETORIC VERSUS ELOQUENCE IN THE AFRO-AMERICAN DOUBLE NARRATIVE: PERSPECTIVES ON AUDIENCE, AMBIVALENCE, AND AMBIGUITY

by

MYLES RAYMOND HURD

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

1985

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Nov 14 - 1984
date

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INTRODUCTION

In a well-known essay first published in 1902, W.E.B. Du Bois defines "double consciousness" as the problematic recognition of every Afro-American of a dual cultural identity:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

Significantly, Du Bois relates the strife inherent in Afro-American double-consciousness to problems faced by black writers during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Aware that racial divisions in this country would require these authors to serve as interpreters of their unique cultural experience for white readers, Du Bois foresaw difficulties in their selection of appropriate subject materials that would avoid alienating those Americans in the best position to purchase the works:

> The would-be black savant was confronted by the paradox that the knowledge his people needed was a twice-told tale to his white neighbors, while the knowledge which would teach the white world was Greek to his own flesh and blood. The innate love of harmony and beauty that set the ruder souls of his people a-dancing and a-singing raised but confusion and doubt in the soul of the black artist; for the beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of a race which his larger audience despised, and he could not articulate the message of another people.[1]

Nevertheless, nineteenth-century black writers attempted--if not to overcome these difficulties--at least to come fully to terms with them. Descendants of transplanted Africans who had been disenfranchised, they were eager to provide their fellow Americans with evidence of the progress that they had made in the development of a literary craftsmanship advanced from what was predominantly an oral tradition. Because they recognized that artistic achievement could lead to an important social acceptance on the part of their readers, their goal was to create didactic literary products that would testify to their willingness to identify themselves as mistreated yet optimistic dark-skinned Americans.

Viewed from the perspective of contemporary Black Aesthetic guidelines, these early Afro-American men and women of letters too eagerly subordinated ther awareness of social injustices to aesthetic concerns. As Adam David Miller notes,

> . . . partly because our early writers thought of themselves as spokesmen for the race to outsiders rather than spokesmen to the race, they allowed themselves to use the language of outsiders instead of their own. They felt that if they accepted the standards of white writing--its conventions of language and correctness, its decorum--they and their race would be presented in a better light. With these early writers language had to be correct, even to the point of stiffness and woodenness; they eschewed "barbarisms," meaning certain characteristic Afro images and usages.[2]

In addition, Addison Gayle Jr. criticizes these writers for seeking the approval of influential white critics instead of directing anger against the socio-economic and political injustices that they witnessed all around them:

> The black artist of the past worked with the white public in mind. The guidelines by which he measured his production was [sic] its acceptance or rejection by white people. To be damned by a white critic and disavowed by a white public was reason enough to damn the artist in the eyes of his own people. The invisible censor, white power, hovered over him in the sanctuary of his private room--whether at the piano or at the typewriter--and, like his brothers, he debated about what he could say to the world without bringing censure upon himself. The mannerisms he had used to survive in the society outside he now brought to his art; and, to paraphrase Richard Wright, he was forced to figure out how to sound each note and how to write down each word. The result was usually an artistic creation filled with half-truths. His works were always seasoned with the proper amount of anger--an anger that dared not reach the explosive level of calling for total demolition of the American society--and condescension, condescension that meant he would assure his audience, at some point in the production, that he believed in the principles of Americanism.[3]

More correctly, these early black writers believed in classical principles of artistic construction and felt that literature could serve a moral function in familiarizing white readers with changes that could be brought about in our society through shifts in attitudes toward unlettered members of their race. The major problem facing these writers lay in developing strategies that would enable them to incorporate elements of protest within their works while at the same time constructing literary products that would be, in accordance with Horatian prescriptions, dulce et utile. Although "rhetoric" in Afro-American writings could refute negative stereotypes, urge social tolerance, decry racism, and pinpoint examples of the dehumanization of blacks, a balance of "eloquence" was required to justify the status of these works as literature.

Unfortunately, for black American authors this balance of rhetoric and eloquence has always been difficult to achieve. Especially for Afro-American novelists and short-story writers, the effort to absorb social

protest in art has created special problems that have called into question the ability of black writers to master these literary forms. As Kenny J. Williams observes, the black writer of fiction has been constantly reminded of his responsibilities as a social-conscious artist "neither wholly the embodiment of a primitive, irrational, creative urge, nor wholly the half-conscious product of sociological and economic determinants":[4]

> It is, of course, clear that the writer can neither expect to live in a social vacuum nor exist in an aesthetic one. By its very nature the novel is a product of the society which produces it; thus it does observe society and possibly [makes] judgments upon it. But the novel is ultimately aware of its limitations as a social force because it must consider the aesthetics of its own form. Thus creative spirit and narrative skill become important. Because of the mandates of the realistic method as well as those of the naturalistic school of writing, many readers have come to expect that the novel--a manifestation of a given society at a given time--must use the world as it is known and must observe, analyze, and judge that world. Within this framework readers have insisted along with many critics that the novelist assume many roles, and--if he has any energy left--he is expected to be the artist. To this we have added that the Negro writer must be a racial leader and demonstrate in all his work his own racial awareness.[5]

But what is the proper relationship between racial awareness and art, and by what means does the black fiction writer entertain his readers while simultaneously presenting them with <u>litterature engagee</u>? In posing questions similar to these, James W. Tuttleton recognizes that the contemporary Afro-American writer has been forced to be cautious in maintaining a balance in assuming the dual roles of "spokesman" and "craftsman":

> The dilemma of the black man is uniquely the dilemma of the black writer. . . . If [he] suffers a cultural schizophrenia, he also experiences the daily humiliation that is the lot of his black bretheren. He shares

> the sense of rage and outrage that burns in the heart of every sensitive black man. He is constrained, like them, to protest against the conditions in which he finds himself, to give vent in action to the pressures of rebellion within him. But to throw himself into the life of politics, direction, agitation / confrontation, is to surrender his role as spectator, mediator and artist, to manipulate his imaginative energies, to dissipate and perhaps to damage his literary gifts. And if, in his role as writer, he is seduced by the overtures of the militant sociologist, he sacrifices the autonomy of his imagination to the services of a social cause: he becomes the racial apologist, the polemicist, the black propagandist--and forfeits thereby the "permanence," "artistry," and "universality" which are the presumed aims of every writer. What is he to do?[6]

Whereas Marxist and Black Aesthetic critics have urged Afro-American authors to underscore socio-economic discrepancies between blacks and whites in this country, other critics have suggested that black writers diversify their themes to refute the charge that most creative black writing reflects narrow and repititive protest. Even though Robert Bone urges the black fiction writer "to enlist his image-making powers in the service of the cause,"[7] Ralph Ellison has warned that such a posture bespeaks a fear of black authors "to leave the uneasy sanctuary of race to take their chances in the world of art."[8] Whereas Amiri Baraka has proclaimed that the "Black Artist's role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it" and "to report and reflect so precisely the nature of the society, and of himself in that society so that other men will be moved by the exactness of his rendering,"[9] Saunders Redding has labeled such a position artistically detrimental and ultimately mistaken in that "aesthetics has no racial, national, or geographical boundaries."[10]

As black novelist William Gardner Smith points out, still another recurrent problem faced by the Afro-American writer of fiction involves his striking a balance between aesthetic and sociological polarities in characterization:

> Writing of Negroes, the novelist has difficulty with his characterizations. His people usually become walking, talking propaganda rather than completely rounded individuals. The Negro writer hesitates, perhaps unconsciously, to temper the goodness of his Negro characters with the dialectical "evil." Fearful of reenforcing stereotypes in the white reader's mind, he often goes to the other extreme, idealizing his characters, making them flat rather than many-sided. Or conscious of the pitfalls listed above and anxious to prove that he is not idealizing his Negro characters, the writer goes to the other extreme--in the name of naturalism--and paints the American Negro as an exaggerated Bigger Thomas with all the stereotyped characteristics emphasized three times over. To strike a compromise--and, incidentally, the truth--is possibly the most difficult feat for the Negro writer.[11]

These problems in language, themes, structure, and characterizations underline special difficulties faced by the black American fiction writer and account for tonal disharmonies frequently found in his creative prose. This study examines tensions between rhetoric and eloquence in seven fictions by six Afro-American writers and posits that these tensions reflect the not always successful attempts of these writers to acknowledge their dual commitments to important sociological and aesthetic concerns. Included are discussion of Charles Chesnutt's "The Passing of Grandison" (1899) and "Baxter's Procrustes" (1904), Paul Laurence Dunbar's The Sport of the Gods (1902), James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1912 / 1927), Richard Wright's "Long Black Song" (1938), Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (1952), and James Baldwin's If Beale Street Could Talk (1974). In selecting these works I have placed a major emphasis on accentuating a variety of narrative strategies employed by black American fiction writers to align sociological dynamics with creative artistry. My approach is chronological, and my concentration is on distinguishing characteristics of these individual works through close analysis of both content and form.

One implication of my research is that the dual commitments of Afro-American literary artists create bivocalities--"double voices" as manifestations of a double conciousness--that explain the presence of thematic overcrowding, characterizational inconsistencies, and ambiguities in their works. In labeling the works to be examined "double narratives," I focus on tensions that directly relate the dual commitments to these structural problems.

Each of the essays looks at methods employed by the six writers to strike a balance between eloquence and rhetoric in their fictions, and each chapter examines the strains imposed on these fictions when one of these aspects is not clearly subordinated to the other. Another implication of my research is that the structural chaos often said to characterize black American fiction is an index of the burdens placed on Afro-American authors forced to determine whether being a black writer means being a black man who happens to write or a writer who happens to be black.

Finally, the present study examines the works of the six authors in terms of their intended audience because the subject matter and techniques used by each writer are shaped by an anticipation of the readers most likely to respond positively to ideas presented in each prose piece. Because none of the six authors has attempted to direct his works to a specifically identified black audience, each fiction attempts to draw white readers into narrative experiences in such a way that elements of social protest (except in the case of Baldwin's novel) do not completely overshadow non-racial concerns. When a balance of racial and non-racial interests is not maintained, the fictions may be said to reflect an ambivalence on the part of the black creative artist toward his dual com-

mitments and to exhibit subsequent amiguities in structural dynamics. By relying on an intentionalist approach to the works, I focus on the aims of the individual writers to avoid making the mistake of predetermining what black writers should have thought about interrelationships between their black and white characters.

Notes

[1] "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," in Three Negro Classics, introd. John Hope Franklin (New York: Avon, 1965), pp. 215-16.

[2] "Some Observations on a Black Aesthetic," in The Black Aesthetic, ed. Addison Gayle Jr. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971, p. 376.

[3] Gayle, "Introduction" to The Black Aesthetic, p. xx.

[4] Howard Mumford Jones, Ideas in America (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1945), p. 42.

[5] "The Masking of the Novelist," in A Singer in the Dawn: Reinterpretations of Paul Laurence Dunbar, ed. Jay Martin (New York: Dodd, 1975), p. 42.

[6] "The Negro Writer as Spokesman," in The Black American Writer, ed. C.W.E. Bigsby (Deland, Fla.: Everett / Edwards, 1969), I, 246-47.

[7] "Ralph Ellison and the Uses of the Imagination," in Anger and Beyond: The Negro Writer in the United States, ed. Herbert Hill (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 102.

[8] Cited in Tuttleton, p. 245.

[9] "State / Meant," in Home: Social Essays (New York: Morrow, 1966), p. 251.

[10] Cited in Abraham Chapman, "Introduction" to Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature, ed. Chapman (New York: New American Library, 1969), pp. 48-49.

[11] "The Negro Writer: Pitfalls and Compensations," in Black Expression: Essays by and about Black Americans in the Creative Arts, ed. Addison Gayle Jr. (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969), p. 289.

CHAPTER I

Codification and Construction in Chesnutt's "The Passing of Grandison" and "Baxter's Procrustes"

The literary achievement of Charles Waddell Chesnutt merits attention in any scholarly study of problems besetting black writers who attempt to describe the frustrations and aspirations of members of their race for white readers. A "voluntary Negro" who chose to identify himself as a black man although his light complexion and Anglo-Saxon features afforded him an opportunity to pass for white, Chesnutt deserves recognition as a significant writer in both the American and Afro-American literary canons "because of his extraordinary ability to blend his African and European heritages into distinctly American forms" and "to refract the American experience through the double vision of one whose racial antecedents placed him on the color line rather than on either side of it."[1] Chesnutt was the first American black to establish a substantial corpus of praiseworthy fiction and the first to gain widespread acclaim from influential white editors during the late nineteenth century. A self-conscious literary artist who deemed craftsmanship in creative prose his "high and holy purpose," Chesnutt strived to bring about an awareness of moral injustices perpetrated against blacks for the benefit of "opinion makers who shaped the values as well as the sensibilities of genteel white America."[2]

Inspired by the extremely favorable critical reception of Albion Tourgee's A Fool's Errand (1879), a fictionalized history of the status

of North Carolina blacks in the Reconstruction-era South, Chesnutt set out to prove to himself that by mastering the techniques of accomplished English and other European writers he could equal the impressive success of both Tourgee and the author of Uncle Tom's Cabin:

> If Judge Tourgee, with his necessarily limited intercourse with colored people and with his limited stay in the South can write such interesting descriptions, such vivid pictures of Southern life and character as to make himself rich and famous, why could not a colored man, who has lived among colored people all his life, who is familiar with their habits, their ruling passions, their prejudices, their whole moral and social condition . . . and who, besides, has possessed such opportunites for observation and conversation with the better class of white men in the South, as to understand their mode of thinking; who was familiar with the political history of the country, and especially with all phases of the slavery question--why could not such a man, if he possessed the same ability, write a far better book about the South than Judge Tourgee or Mrs. Stowe has written?[3]

Yet, as a black man of letters in Cleveland, Ohio, in the 1880's, Chesnutt faced roadblocks that neither Tourgee nor Stowe was forced to encounter. Recognizing that the reading public of his day preferred stories that perpetuated stereotyped images of contented slaves, tragic mulattoes, and wretched freedmen, he knew that he would have to shape his works to appeal to popular taste if he was to support his family from his writing and secure the praise of astute critics. Because the circle of Cleveland black friends who would purchase his works was small, he acknowledged that he would have to compose short works of prose that would both amuse and subtly arouse white readers. As a hint from George Washington Cable suggested, Chesnutt was to provide his readers with familiar characterizations if he was to make his name a household word: "Remember in your description of persons that the greatest element of

strength is to yield all the ground you honestly can to the possible prejudices of your reader."[4]

Taking into account Cable's recommendation, Chesnutt chose to perfect a narrative strategy that might bring about a change in the moral attitudes of whites toward blacks in fictions both entertaining and instructive. His prose would offer

> . . . not a fierce determined onslaught; not an appeal to force, for this is something that force can but slightly affect; but a moral revolution which must be [accomplished] in a different manner. . . . The Negro's part is to prepare himself for social recognition and equality; and it is the province of literature to open the way for him to get it--to accustom the public mind to the idea; and while amusing them, to lead people out, imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step, to the desired state of feeling.[5]

This strategy encouraged Chesnutt to rely on codification within triptychtic narrative structures to familiarize his readers with the inhumanity of slavery, the black man's quest for equality, and forces preventing the black man from reaching his goals. The trick was to include pointers to these themes without alienating his audience with methods that would seem too strident. To be avoided were stories overly didactic and sermonized as well as prose in other ways too forceful in protest. Instead, he chose to develop a means of manipulating the responses of prospective readers to characters and actions and of mining irony, antithesis, understatement, parody, and ambiguity to achieve his aims. As William L. Andrews points out,

> . . . The moral campaign had to accustom the public mind gradually to the idea of Afro-American "recognition and equality." The job of race literature was, therefore, fundamentally a matter of <u>artfulness</u> rather than apology for one race or criticism of another. The black writer could change society only when he

> had changed people's values. And he could change their values by only indirect means, for their defenses and prejudices were too readily mobilized by direct challenges or appeals. . . . Chesnutt's early concept of literary strategy justified the entertainment and amusement of white readers as a means of disarming them emotionally and placing them in the "desired state of feeling" which [he] wished them to have toward blacks. Leading those readers "unconsciously" to his ultimate goal, acceptance of the Afro-American's worth and equality, posed a much more difficult literary problem, but much of Chesnutt's mature work derives its distinctive artfulness from [his] adherence to his early devised strategy and his success with it. Many of Chesnutt's most memorable heroes are confidence men who lead their usually gullible victims "imperceptibly" and "unconsciously" to some ironic and unsettling revelation.[6]

Chesnutt's strategy for effective codification proved fruitful in August 1887, when Walter Hines Page, editor of the Atlantic Monthly, accepted "The Goophered Grapevine" for publication in that journal, thus making Chesnutt the first black American writer to gain stature in the most influential literary journal of its day. Twelve years later officials at Houghton Mifflin republished the story along with six others in a volume entitled The Conjure Woman but withheld information about Chesnutt's race.

In each tale readers found an inside plot narrated by Uncle Julius McAdoo, a former slave who, in the tradition of Joel Chanlder Harris' Uncle Remus, reveals himself as a repository of black folk wisdom and anecdotes about superstitions and "conjuring," and an outside framing commentary related by a Northerner who has moved to North Carolina to pursue his interest in grape culture and to place his wife in a healthful climate. Whereas the outside plot is articulated in standard English, the inside tale related by Julius is narrated in heavy, authentic black dialect. By structuring a plot within a plot in each fiction, Chesnutt created stories

in which the "relation of Julius to his white employers [i.e., the Northerner John and his wife Annie] is emblematic of the audience-artist relation. The black storyteller functions as a kind of proxy for Chesnutt, while John and Annie serve as stand-ins for Chesnutt's white audience."[7] Carefully, subtly, Chesnutt offered perceptive readers accounts of the misfortunes of slaves caught up in the South's "peculiar institution." Yet, as David Britt notes, the black author was able to accomplish his thematic aims without sacrificing entertainment:

> The Conjure Woman is primarily a study of duplicity that masks or reveals its meaning according to the predisposition of the reader. All the elements of fiction--structure, characterization, language, and theme--interlock in a subtle portrayal of a black writer "wu'king his roots" on an unperceiving audience. By sandwiching Julius' narrative in between John's section, Chesnutt gives the first and final word to the white man, implying that the white man is the "official" interpreter of Julius' yarn. Though this structural device Chesnutt creates a surface level of meaning that leaves the Southern caste system undisturbed. . . . What Chesnutt does, therefore, through the characterization of John and through the structural pattern of the book is to make The Conjure Woman an apparently "safe" work, a reassuring collection of tales that depicts a contented, entertaining black man working within the unchallenged framework of American social and intellectual mores.[8]

In "Po Sandy," for example, white readers who felt no desire to have their attitudes toward blacks challenged found an amusing description of the competence of Aunt Peggy, a conjure woman who turns the titular character into a tree so that he can avoid being sold down the Mississippi River and separated from Tenie, his slave wife. Whereas insensitive readers would have shared John's skepticism over the possibility of a human being's transformation into a tree, more careful readers would ideally have seen that the "identification of Sandy with the tree can be viewed

as a comment on the status of slaves [who] were simply natural resources to be used, not essentially different from cattle or timber."[9] That this scheme for double-layered codification paid off is evident in the remarks of an early reviewer of the collections of stories, an unchallenged reader who found within the tales "that peace of mind and contentment of spirit which follow hard upon these entertaining narratives of witchcraft."[10]

By December 1899, when Houghton Mifflin brought out a second gathering of stories under the title The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line, Chesnutt had decided that Julius had served his purpose and had been "used up." Determining to move "from the realm of superstition" to the "region of feeling and passion,"[11] he sought to develop a maturity of technique within his fiction. In "The Passing of Grandison,"[12] the best tale within the new collection, he offers us one of his most technically sophisticated efforts in prose. A "loyalty tale turned inside out,"[13] the story presents a trickster slave who poses as a faithful retainer to secure freedom for not only himself but all the other members of his family. Despite Robert Bone's assertion that the narrative gives us an "inversion of the plantation myth" offering "little scope for critical commentary,"[14] a close reading of "PG" shows Chesnutt at the height of his ability as a duplicitous literary craftsman.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator briefly sketches a historical incident concerning a liberal-minded Northerner who steals a slave from Sam Briggs, a cruel owner known for throwing cordwood against the legs of the black men he considered his property. After being caught, tried, and convicted in the late 1850's, the Northerner dies of cholera in a penitentiary. This incident serves as the basis for the framing device in the story. Dick Owens, son of a prosperous plantation aristocrat, relates details of the virtuous crime to Charity Lomax, whose hand he

seeks in marriage. Charity not only considers the Northerner's actions justifiable on moral grounds but hints that she could love a man who performed an act just as courageous. Seizing upon a glimmer of hope to encourage her to accept him, Dick decides to emancipate one of his father's hundred slaves to impress her. Yet, because he is unwilling to risk extreme danger in carrying out this enterprise, he strategizes a scheme designed to arouse as little suspicion as possible. Explaining that he would benefit from a trip to the North, Dick secures Colonel Owens' permission to make the trip and to take along a slave as valet and companion. After rejecting a seemingly crafty servant who seems capable of reading, the Colonel approves Grandison, an "abolitionist-proof" fieldhand. In thick dialect Grandison informs the Colonel that he himself is content on the plantation and subsequently indicates that he appreciates the benevolent protection of his owner. The trip, then, serves a double purpose within the story--a journey that will enable Dick not only to win Charity's love but to provide the titular character with a glimpse of freedom.

Dick, however, becomes frustrated in New York and Boston when Grandison shows himself a model of the loyal slave. His tactics all failures, he temporarily curses the "stupidity of a slave who could be free but would not" (p. 187) but vows to make his plan succeed by taking the dutiful servitor to the Canadian boundary of Niagara Falls, safely beyond the reach of the Fugitive Slave Law. When Grandison's stubborn devotion becomes almost too much for the young Southerner to bear, he pays three men to kidnap the slave while the latter is sleeping to allow himself to return alone to Kentucky with thoughts of Charity's love more secure.

Yet, three weeks later a married Dick Owens is shocked to see the slave drive up in a carriage with the Colonel. Relating what seems a

wildly improbable account of his having been imprisoned in a cabin deep in the Canadian woods, Grandison further explains his escape from abolitionists intent upon murdering him and his trek on foot back to the South. Unable to refute this story because of the risks inherent in exposing himself as a criminal, Dick hears the Colonel praise Grandison as a plantation black who "knew when he was well off, and where his friends were" (p. 198). At the conclusion of the story, however, the Colonel finds out how mistaken he has been about his faithful slave. On a Monday morning he discovers that Grandison has disappeared along with Betty, a slave maid. Also unaccountably absent are Grandison's father, mother, two brothers, and sister. Although the Colonel attempts to track down his runaways, he catches up with them only at Lake Erie, where they sneer derisively at him from a steamboat headed toward Canada.

By carefully pacing his story, Chesnutt withholds information about Grandison's clever trickery until the conclusion of the tale so that the revelation of the slave's having engineered a plan to emancipate himself and his relatives comes simultaneously with the Colonel's discovery of the slave's treachery. The narrative succeeds because Chesnutt carefully modifies then-popular fictive frameworks to effect changes in attitudes within his readers. Like Henry James, he chooses "showing" over "telling" to attain desired responses. By drawing upon the Test of Love and the Fulfillment of the Tasks, both popular motifs in traditional romance, and by parodying the plantation fictions of writers such as Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon, Chesnutt constructs a double-level story that entertains and at the same time provides insights into the psychology of slavery before the Civil War.

The romance motifs enable Chesnutt to deflect interest from Grandison in the first section of the story so that the reader focuses on a

young white character's struggles to gain the devotion of the woman he hopes to marry. Indeed, Dick emerges as a more likely candidate for the status of protagonist until we learn of the slave's artfulness. Because we sympathize with Dick's efforts to impress Charity, we are eager for his plan to work. By taking into account this anticipated response from his readers, Chesnutt links Grandison's design for freedom with Dick's quest to lead her to the altar. Thus, the reader who champions Dick's romantic cause simultaneously endorses Grandison's escape from the Colonel. By delaying the final twist of the story until its very end, Chesnutt shapes his narrative along the same lines as other popular fictions that depicted the faithful plantation darky as a familiar literary presence so that he can skillfully parallel the love plot with the elaborate escape motif.

Chesnutt provides us with a few clues within the story to prepare us for Grandison's con artistry, but these hints are so subtle that only the most perceptive reader can guess the outcome. The first paragraph, for example, illustrates the effectiveness of this codification: "When it is said that it was done to please a woman, there ought perhaps to be enough said to explain anything; for what a man will not do to please a woman is yet to be discovered. Nevertheless, it might be well to state a few preliminary facts to make it clear why young Dick Owens tried to run one of his father's negro men off to Canada" (p. 168). The first sentence serves as a buffer for the second. Whereas in the first statement the narrator promises a tale about a young man in love, the second points out that this romantic interest will involve a treatment of interracial relationships as well. The courtship between Dick and Charity interlinks with the relationship between Dick and Grandison in order for the young Kentuckian to assume a double role in the double narrative—

a lovesick swain whose ideas, like those of his sweetheart, contrast with the strict opinions of a member of the older generation, and an unwitting Southern liberal whose despair paves the way for Grandison to accomplish important goals.

To alert us to the significance of these goals, Chesnutt carefully incroporates historical and literary signposts within the story. A reference to the Fugitive Slave Law in the exposition, for example, identifies an important roadblock to the titular character, but because of its placement within the narrative also allows racially insensitive readers a succinct explanation for Dick's having to travel with his slave companion from the continental United States to Canada. Charity's admission that the account of Briggs's cruelty "[made] the Quaker blood that came from [her] grandmother assert itself" (p. 171) points to a group of religious men and women who aided runaway slaves, but the comment itself is softened by the absence from the story of any characters specificially identified as Quakers and by Chesnutt's having Charity visit her Tennessee aunt while Dick is away so that she is placed "offstage" during most of the narrative action.

When Grandison explains to the Colonel that he returned to Kentucky by keeping the North Star at his back, he provides us with information on the method of traveling that escaped slaves actually used to get away from barbarous owners, and near the conclusion of the story Chesnutt charts a familiar path that slaves relied on to gain freedom: "The fugitives were traced, and followed from point to point, on their northward run through Ohio. Several times the hunters were close upon their heals, but the magnitude of the escaping party begot unusual vigilance on the part of those who sympathized with the fugitives, and strangely enough,

the underground railroad seemed to have had its tracks cleared and signals set for this particular train" (p. 201).

In indicating that the Northern liberal dies of cholera, Chesnutt chooses a disease that snuffs out the life of numerous white characters (including Stowe's Little Eva) who oppose slavery in nineteenth-century abolitionist fictions, and in the Colonel's declaring Grandison's account of having walked back home "as good as one of Scott's novels" and "something that Mr. Simms or some other one of our Southern authors ought to write up" (p. 199), Chesnutt refers to an English novelist whose works were condemned by Mark Twain as romances leading Southern readers into support of secession and subsequent warfare, and to a popular Southern writer whose fictions presented negative images of blacks. Upon our rereading "PG," we see that the overall effect of these clues is to provide evidence of Chesnutt's skillfulness as a literary confidence man.

In addition, Chesnutt's technique involves a careful control of ironies, inversions, and antitheses. In his depiction of the Colonel's faith in Grandison, for instance, Chesnutt achieves a consummate irony that deflates the white character's mistaken notions about the unshakable fidelity of slaves:

> "I should like to know, Grandison, whether you don't think yourself a great deal better off than those poor free negroes down by the plank road, with no kind master to look after them and no mistress to give them medicine when they're sick and--and--"
>
> "Well, I sh'd jes' reckon I is better off, suh, dan dem low-down free niggers, suh! Ef anybody ax 'em who dey belong ter, dey has ter day nobody, er e'se lie erbout it. Anybody ax me who I b'longs ter, I ain' got no 'casion ter be shame' ter tell 'em, no suh, 'deed I ain', suh!"
>
> The colonel was beaming. This was true gratitude, and his feudal heart thrilled at such appreciative homage. What cold-blooded, heartless monsters they were who would break up this blissful relationship of kindly protection on the one hand, of wise subordination and

> loyal dependence on the other! The colonel always became indignant at the mere thought of such wickedness.
>
> "Grandison," the colonel continued, "your young master Dick is going North for a few weeks, and I am thinking of letting him take you along. I shall send you on this trip, Grandison, in order that you may take care of your young master. He will need some one to wait on him, and no one can ever do it so well as one of the boys brought up with him on the old plantation. I am going to trust him in your hands, and I'm sure you'll do your duty faithfully, and bring him back home safe and sound--to old Kentucky." (pp.178-79)

By bracketing Grandison's dialect between the Southern landowner's good English, Chesnutt allows the reader momentarily to give credence to the Colonel's assertions. Yet, the intervening non-dialogue paragraph highlights the flaws in the Colonel's thinking. The relationship between slaves and masters in the 1850's was anything but "blissful," and the "wickedness" associated with "cold-blooded, heartless monsters" is slavery itself, not the efforts of decent men and women with "head wisdom" and "heart sense" to acknowledge the black man's humanity. Upon recalling details of the story after our discovery of Grandison's trickery, we identify the passage as an example of heightened dramatic irony anticipating the Colonel's comeuppance.

Moreover, Chesnutt, by pairing irony with depictions of minor characters within the tale, subtly undermines negative stereotypes about blacks. To correct the stereotype of black laziness, for example, he describes a slave's "catching flies and pulling their wings off to pass the time" (p. 78) but notes that the slave is a "yellow youth." Thus, like Twain in Pudd'nhead Wilson, Chesnutt indicates that the slave's indolence can be attributed to his white forbears just as easily as to his black lineage. Chesnutt further refutes the stereotypic identification of blackness with laziness by presenting Dick as an "extremely indolent" heir presumptive to his father's estate. Dick himself admits that court-

ing Charity has been the hardest work he has ever performed, and the Colonel observes that his son is "as lazy as the Devil" and requires the "whip of necessity, or the spur of ambition" (pp. 169, 170). Besides cleverly alluding to instruments of punishment used against slaves, Chesnutt relies on these comments from the Colonel to expose Dick's lack of industry and thus prevent the reader from earmarking laziness as a racial characteristic. We recall that both Grandison and Dick see blacks gainfully employed as waiters, bell-hops, and hostlers in the North and that Grandison himself exemplifies model fortitude and endurance in his three-week walk back to the South.

Still another refutation of the stereotype is revealed in the Colonel's objections to Tom's accompanying Dick to New York. The Colonel argues that Tom has been spotted holding a newspaper and reading it while pretending to be looking at a woodcut. In selecting the word <u>woodcut</u> Chesnutt encourages the reader to recall Briggs' cruelty against his slaves. Tom himself, when asked by Dick to be a traveling companion, reveals that freedom "was something he had long contemplated in the abstract but had never been able to muster up sufficient courage to attempt in the concrete" but that "he was was prudent enough to dissemble his feelings" (p. 174). We remember that Dick is frightened by the prospect of being caught as an ally to slave freedom and that his part in Grandison's escape is revealed only after the Civil War. By presenting Tom as a slave no more lazy than a white central figure in the story, Chesnutt shows that industriousness is an index of opportunity and sufficient motivation.

Chesnutt also counters the negative associations of lying with blackness by describing Dick as a "very poor liar, having rarely had occasion or inclination to tell anything but the truth" (p. 194), thus sig-

naling that the morality of deception is relative to the goal to be achieved as a consequence of indirectness. In this way Chesnutt encourages his readers to deem Grandison's duplicity a justifiable response to a powerful desire for freedom.

Just as irony is an effective element of Chesnutt's technique, so is inversion, a vehicle that enables Chesnutt to expose Dick's shortsightedness in his relationship with Grandison. Although the young Southerner undertakes the trip to the North to impress Charity, he forgets that Grandison, also a young man in love, has been promised marriage to Betty upon returning to Kentucky. Dick's motives for securing Grandison's escape are only superficially benevolent because they fail to take into account a recognition that the love betweens blacks is as strong as that between whites. In an important Canadian scene Chesnutt emphasizes the way that Dick disregards Grandison's feelings for Betty as well as the slave's desire to gain freedom for his relatives. Temporarily distracted by the beauty of a waitress, Dick loses sight of the titular character. Rushing out of an inn to look for the slave, he finds his charge asleep near one of the cataracts. Determined to rid himself of the black retainer forever, he devises a plan, the details of which are given from the perspective of the background character: "She thought she saw something pass from the white man to the other, but at that moment her duties called her away from the window, and when she looked out again the young gentleman [Dick] had disappeared and the hostler, with two other young men of the neighborhood, one white and one colored, were walking rapidly toward the Falls" (p. 194). Providing the only clue within the story to the means that Dick used to make his plan successful, the passage also shows that Chesnutt deliberately shifts his narrative focus for a specific pur-

pose. The depiction of the waitress is designed to signal a recollection of not only Dick's separation from Charity but Grandison's distance from Betty.

Because Chesnutt denies us an opportunity to cite with precision the point at which Grandison first puts his plan for escape into operation, we are given options for determining the extent to which an alliance between the protagonist and white liberals is responsible for the slave's unshackling himself from the Colonel. In Boston, Dick sees Grandison in conversation with both a "sharp-featured man" and a "gentleman in clerical garb" but is perplexed to hear Grandison explain that both are abolitionists "pestering the life" out of him. In offering an account of his southward trip from Canada, Grandison gives a highly improbable story about the attempts of the abolitionists to kill him but also adds that they accused him of being a spy sent from the South to locate escaped slaves. If Grandison is telling the truth about his incarceration in the Canadian woods, then apparently the plan for his family's escape is undertaken only upon his return. A more attractive interpretive option, however, suggests that Grandison had freedom in mind from the very beginning and simply went along with Dick's pseudo-liberal strategems long enough to engineer his own plan in his own skillful way.

Less uncertain is our recognition that Chesnutt emerges as much a trickster as the titular character in "PG." On its surface level the story offers us a plantation romance with a clever twist. On a deeper level it registers its impact as a protest fiction highlighting racial disparities in the ante-bellum South. On a third level the fiction illustrates Chesnutt's artfulness as a master of aesthetic concealments in an art story that analyzes the strategies available to black writers dependent upon the tastes of their white reading public. To Chesnutt's

enduring credit, the story can be appreciated as a prose piece that displays all three of these levels as evidence of his accomplishment as a writer who managed to manipulate his readers to have them reach a "desired state of feeling" toward blacks.

Unfortunately, reader response to Chesnutt's longer works of fiction, which broached racial issues in a more direct way, was far less than favorable. The period between the publication of his two volumes of short stories and "Baxter's Procrustes,"[15] the last of his stories to appear in AM, caused him anxiety and frustration. Disheartened by the low sales of The House Behind the Cedars (1900), a full-length depiction of a young woman who passes for white up to the day before her marriage to a Southern blueblood, Chesnutt was to acknowledge that the time was not yet opportune for him to make literature a reliable means of gaining fame and fortune. The novel sold only 3,000 copies, far fewer than the number that he and his editors had believed the public would purchase for this melodramatic treatment of Rena Walden, its tragic heroine. Yet, Chesnutt, who had given up his profitable court-reporting practice to try his hand at supporting his family from his literary efforts, was unwilling to abandon completely his "high and holy purpose." Buoyed up by the receptiveness of both Houghton Mifflin and Harper's to an outline for a "strong race problem novel,"[16] he determined that he could once again find a successful formula for instructing his white readers in interracial dynamics while simultaneously entertaining them with a good story shaped in the romance vein that they wanted.

When Chesnutt discovered, however, that his new effort, The Marrow of Traditon (1902), sold no more copies than HBC and only 1,000 additional copies by the end of the year, he was ready to concede that his white readers were uncomfortable with full-length fictions depicting blacks

burdened with race-related problems in prominent narrative roles: "I am beginning to supect that the public as a rule does not care for books in which the principal characters are colored people, or written with a striking sympathy with that race as contrasted with the white man."[17] That he had modified his thinking about the kinds of works that would please the mass reading audience of his day is evident is his reopening his stenographic office later the same year.

Still, Chesnutt was to endure yet another major embarrassment in 1902, one that was to hurt his pride as much as his reputation. Sometime during this fateful year his name was brought up for membership in Cleveland's exclusive Rowfant Club, a male literary society counting among its members that Midwestern city's best-known antiquarians and lawyers. Chesnutt was not admitted. Years later a Rowfanter publicly confirmed Chesnutt's suspicion that he had been rejected because of his race.[18] Still dejected over the now-fading fame that had once attached itself to his short stories and downcast by this slight from the prestigious Cleveland club, he chose to return to the short-story format and to re-engage his craftsmanship in a triad of works that a sensitive editor might be encouraged to accept.

"BP," the third of these stories, holds an important place in Chesnutt's canon because its theme and technique reflect his frustrations at a climactic period in his literary career. Regarded by several critics as his best story, it takes the form of a light satire directed against a group of book collectors who fall prey to a hoax perpetrated by one of their fellow members. Although the story, which presents no blacks, avoids direct treatment of discrimination or other racial themes, its focus on its protagonist's quest for universality in art and his

sensitivity to the prospect of either cursory or overly captious criticism from dabblers in literature point to major issues that confronted Chesnutt before and after his membership bid was turned down. Like many of Chesnutt's other frequently anthologized short fictions, "BP" stands out as an engaging narrative because of its numerous levels of interpretaion. The heavy irony in the story is significant because "historically, irony has been more than just a literary device to Black people, for saying one thing and meaning another has often meant psychological survival in a racist society."[19] Moreover, the story merits our attention because this satire "about a white book club of Chesnutt's acquaintance serves to illustrate the nature of his talent, for it displays many of the same techniques that are so often missed in those 'stories of the color line,' which make up the bulk of the Chesnutt canon."[20]

On its most accessible level of meaning, "BP" relates the details of an extraordinary hoax. The Bodleian Club, Chesnutt's fictional substitution for the Rowfanters, counts among its members the most illustrious exemplars of Cleveland's best society. Listed among its mementoes are a "paperweight which once belonged to Goethe, a lead pencil used by Emerson, an autograph letter of Matthew Arnold, and a chip from a tree felled by Mr. Gladstone" (p. 413). Although the club cultivates an interest in books and book collecting, the members are less enthusiastic about the literary merit of individual works as they are about appurtenances that fetch high prices at auctions. According to Jones, the narrator, the qualities that make a book valuable in the eyes of the Bodleians are "fine and curious bindings. hand made linen papers, of uncut or deckle edges, of wide margins, and limited editions" (p. 414); little attention is directed to the themes or techniques of the authors whose works line the club's shelves. At auctions held no more frequently

than twice yearly the members send in copies of their rarest holdings for spirited bidding intended to elevate the value of works belonging to a small circle of acquaintances. From this description of the club, it soon becomes clear to the reader that the members are caught up in the surface appearances of things and that their mercenary interest in books leaves little time for careful estimations of the meanings behind the print on pages.

Jones notes that the most scholarly member of the Bodleian circle is the titular character, a Harvard graduate whose curly, light-brown hair and grey eyes suggest an identification with Chesnutt. Suspected by Jones of being an unsuccessful author, Baxter espouses a gloomy philosophy that characterizes society as the procrustean force doling out adversities in different proportions to all of us:

> Society was the Procrustes which, like the Greek bandit of old, caught every man born into the world, and endeavored to fit him to some preconceived standard, generally to the one for which he was least adapted. The world was full of men and women who were merely square pegs in round holes, and vice versa. Most marriages were unhappy because the contracting parties were not properly mated. Religion was merely superstition, science for the most part sciolism, popular education merely a means of forcing the stupid and repressing the bright, so that all the youth of the rising generation might conform to the same dull, dead level of democratic mediocrity. Life would soon become so monotonously uniform and so uniformly monotonous as to be scarce worth the living. (p. 416)

Moreover, because of his fear of possible disappointment from a short-lived literary career, Baxter was known as a man who had

> . . . always spoken in terms of such unmeasured pity for the slaves of the pen, who were dependent upon the whim of an undiscriminating public for recognition and a livelihood, that no one of us had ever suspected him of aspirations toward publication, until it oc-

> curred one day that Baxter's attitude with regard to publication might be viewed in the light of effect as well as cause--that his scorn of publicity might as easily arise from a failure to achieve it, as his never having published might be due to his preconceived disdain of the vulgar popularity which one must share with the pugilist or balloonist of the hour. (p. 415)

This sentiment, which would have reflected Chesnutt's low spirits between 1902 and 1904, explains a reluctance on Baxter's part to expose himself to the judgments of impercipient readers who might misvalue his writings, especially if they were not the kinds of works guaranteed to bring in high sales for his publishers.

Yet, Baxter, like his artistic creator, forsakes abandoning literature altogether. A small gathering of the titular character's closest friends is allowed to listen to bits of a longish poem that appears to highlight his pessimistic attitudes toward life. Baxter's interest in reading to his friends, along with the news that the rival Grolier Club in New York has purchased a rare copy of Campanella's sonnets for $250, prompts one member to suggest that Baxter publish his entire poem under the supervision of the Bodleians. To cause Baxter no undue embarrassment, distribution of the work is to be limited to fifty numbered copies, and a committee is set up to review the manuscript at a special meeting to be held at the completion of the project. Jones himself is designated as one of the three reviewers who will offer a glimpse into the titular character's poetic concerns.

Jones's pretentiousness, manifested in his unwillingness to soil his copy of what might prove to be a rare collector's item, prevents him from taking the wise step of actually reading the manuscript before composing his thoughts on it. Comparing notes, hints, and bits of gossip with Baxter's closest friends, he generalizes points about the "Procrustes" in his presentation so that the other members are given the impression that

the work is reminiscent of Khayyam's Rubaiyat. At the meeting the members are proud of the achievement of one of their own until an English visitor satisfies his curiosity about the singularly praised work by taking a penknife and cutting the pages of one of the club's two copies. Exposed are blank pages and Baxter's rather elaborate fraud. Although a majority of the Bodleians toss their copies of the poem into the fire and contemplate asking Baxter for his resignation, a few wiser members hold on to what actually turns out to be the most famous possession of the club.

Members of the Rowfant Club recognized that they were objects of Chesnutt's satire. In 1910 Chesnutt's name was once again raised for membership, and on this second occasion he became a Rowfanter, the only black on the rolls of the toney literary society.

Besides a sally against the Bodleians in general and against Jones, the gullible narrator, in specific, Chesnutt certainly had in mind a story that would analyze the problems that he was facing in attempting to construct a novel-length fiction that would capture much of the same praise that had greeted The Conjure Woman and The Wife of His Youth. In part, his frustration was attributable to his inability to master the novel form, and Chesnutt was advised by his editors that the manuscripts for HBC and MT presented narratives better suited for shorter lengths. Chesnutt was told, in fact, that the undeveloped subplots in his novels betrayed his inclination for short-story writing. That Baxter's literary production is a proposed book-length poem is a bitter reminder of Chesnutt's own disappointment and uncertainties.

Baxter's brooding philosophy, as elaborated by Jones, points to a related issue of central concern to Chesnutt, a problem often cited as the

classic dilemma of the black writer--that of "attracting the moneyed white buyership without alienating himself from the support and social interests of the Afro-American community."[21] Aware that book buyers in 1902 were disinclined to read fiction in which black characters were given foregrounded prominence over whites, Chesnutt realized that in "BP," a story with all white characters, he could refer indirectly to the burden he faced in shaping literature to manifest a change in attitudes toward members of his race. Thus, it is not surprising that Jones's faked review hints at a gloomy outlook toward society and that the Bodleians are revealed as dilettantes more interested in the monetary value of bindings and margins than in the social messages that first-rate literature could advance.

Significantly, Baxter is portrayed as a man who had paid for an expensive operation for the son of the club's porter but who, upon hearing of the child's subsequent death, expressed the belief that the youth was better off. This ambivalence--hope couched in despair--comes farily close to Chesnutt's mixed feelings about continuing to outline future works of literature that would benefit blacks. "BP" was a successful accident that found him grappling with problems concerning his craftsmanship and appeal to readers who wanted to treat themselves to pleasant story lines without digesting racially didactic themes. In addition, perhaps like Melville in "Benito Cereno," hesnutt may have composed his story to attack unperceptive or impatient editors, for whom Jones serves as an appropriate representative.

Art, then, in one important sense, became a means of therapy for Chesnutt; the major issues approached under the veil of a light satire unoffensive to the Rowfanters offered him a means of re-evaluating the

purpose that he wanted his best writing to serve. That he had to wait almost three more decades to receive belated recognition for his entire corpus testifies to his having been buffeted by readers too eager to judge literature and authors by surface appearances and past achievements. Fortunately, Chesnutt possessed the talent for accentuating his own problematic situation and that of numerous other Afro-American writers in "BP," a short story that works its own very special form of magic upon readers familiar with the price that Chesnutt had to pay to make his codification effective.

Notes

[1] Sylvia Lyons Render, ed. and introd., The Short Fiction of Charles Waddell Chesnutt (Washington, D.C.: Howard Univ. Press, 1974), p. 3.

[2] William L. Andrews, The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1980), p. 274.

[3] Render, Charles W. Chesnutt (Boston: Twayne, 1980), p. 21.

[4] Andrews, p. 25.

[5] The notation is dated 29 may 1980 and is cited in Render, Charles W. Chesnutt, p. 22.

[6] Andrews, pp. 14-15.

[7] Robert Bone, Down Home: A History of Afro-American Short Fiction from Its Beginnings to the End of the Harlem Renaissance (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1975), p. 83.

[8] "Chesnutt's Conjure Tales: What You See Is What You Get," CLA Journal, 15 (March 1972), 271, 273. For other important evaluations of Chesnutt's short-story techniques, see William L. Andrews, "The Significance of Charles W. Chesnutt's Conjure Stories," Southern Literary Journal, 7 (Fall 1974), 78-99, Richard E. Baldwin, "The Art of The Conjure Woman," American Literature, 43 (November 1971), 385-98, Melvin Dixon, "The Teller as Folk Trickster in Chesnutt's The Conjure Woman," CLA Journal, 18 (December 1974), 186-97, James R. Giles, "Chesnutt's Primus and Annie: A Contemporary View of The Conjure Woman," Markham Review, 3 (May 1972), 46-49, Theodore Hovet, "Chesnutt's 'The Goophered Grapevine' as Social Comment," Black American Literature Forum, 7 (Fall 1973), 86-90, A. Robert Lee, "'The Desired State of Feeling': Charles Waddell Chesnutt and Afro-American Literary Tradition," Durham Univ Journal, 35 (March 1974), 163-70, and Julian D. Mason, "The Stories of Charles W. Chesnutt," Southern Literary Journal (Autumn 1968), 89-94.

[9] Britt, p. 246.

[10] "Recent Fiction" (anonymous review), The Critic, 35 (July 1899), 646; cited in Britt, p. 273.

[11] Andrews, Literary Career, p. 21.

[12] My source is Charles W. Chesnutt, "The Passing of Grandison," in The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line (1899; Ridgewood, N.J.: Gregg, 1967), pp. 168-202. Subsequent references are indicated parenthetically in the text.

[13] Bone, p. 74.

[14] Bone, p. 95.

[15] My source is Render, Short Fiction, pp. 413-22. Subsequent references are indicated parenthetically in the text.

[16] Andrews, p. 124.

[17] Cited in Andrews, p. 127.

[18] In Charles Waddell Chesnutt (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1952), p. 244, Helen Chesnutt, the writer's daughter, notes that the Rowfanters realized that they were the objects of the story's satire. Robert Hemenway cites a biographical essay by John B. Nicholson Jr., who acknowledges that Chesnutt was rejected for membership because the "time was not ripe at the turn of the century for a gentleman of race to be proposed." See Hemenway's "'Baxter's Procrustes': Irony and Protest," CLA Journal, 18 (December 1974), 173.

[19] Hemenway, p. 195.

[20] Hemenway, p. 195.

CHAPTER II

Blackness and Borrowed Obscurity: Dunbar's The Sport of the Gods

To Paul Laurence Dunbar, a contemporary of Chesnutt, recent critical judgments have not been kind. Like Chesnutt, Dunbar established his reputation as a popular writer in the late 1890's, primarily as a poet whose verse in heavy black dialect gained preference over his works in standard English with reviewers such as William Dean Howells.[1] Although Dunbar's literary efforts, like Chesnutt's, were circumscribed by the opinions of profit-eager publishers and the pedestrian tastes of the mass reading public, an abundance of scholarly commentary has deemed Dunbar an accommodationist whose "schizophrenic" attitude toward his responsibilities as a black writer suggests that he "never entirely escaped the consequences of these limitations, and frequently did not try to."[2]

Even though Afro-American novelists had been concerned with racial themes up to the time of his greatest popularity, Dunbar, prouder of his poetry than of his prose, "did not view the novel as a medium for social change."[3] Rather, he recognized an "unwritten code of being accepted by a large reading audience [and] attempted initially to deal with universal themes in the most entertaining way, for nurtured as he was in the belief in the American dream, he believed that he could sing of life 'serencely sweet.'"[4] Thus, it is not surprising that one of his harshest detractors has noted that "with the possible exception of Frank Yerby, no Afro-American novelist has been more confused concerning his true identity or worth as a black writer than was Dunbar, and none succeeded so

well in using the novel form as a vehicle for vicarious identification with symbols drawn from an alien world."[5]

Dunbar, however, lashed out at injustices against blacks in several letters published by prominent newspapers in his hometown of Dayton, Ohio--a terminus of the Underground Railroad--and in other large American cities. Nevertheless, the prevailing critical sentiment points to his weaknesses as a writer of non-poetic works. His first two novels present characters whose racial identities are left unclarified, and his third novel introduces Nigger Ed, the only black character of prominence, as a stereotyped plantation figure whose chief trait is his penchant for lying. In summarizing Dunbar's low stature as a prose writer, Edward Margolies concludes that the black author's short stories and longer fictional efforts merit only brief comment:

> His short stories at their best are prose replicas of his dialect poems--at their worst, oversentimentalized versions of the saccharine school of the ante-bellum apologists for the South. His novels are badly written, frequently melodramatic and drearily drawn out. Their chief interest lies in the light they throw on Dunbar's social views. Of his four novels, only The Sport of the Gods (1902) deals mainly with Negro characters--and here he implicitly urges Negroes to submit to small-town plantation values--despite racial injustices--since cities, by their very nature, are degenerate and corrupt. However kindly a view one may take of Dunbar's problems in making his books acceptable to white readers, one cannot escape the feeling that he himself was one of his own worst oppressors.[6]

Because the novel to which Margolies refers has recently been re-evaluated to suggest that Dunbar cautiously masks racial protest, an analysis of The Sport of the Gods[7] provides an appropriate "test case" for assessing Dunbar's major thematic concerns.

In his revisionist approach to Sport, Gregory L. Candela assigns himself the task of discounting previous estimations of Dunbar that re-

garded him as an "Uncle Tom" author whose works placed him squarely in the "plantation school" of American letters.[8] Agreeing with Darwin Turner that prose was Dunbar's literary "voice of protest,"[9] Candela posits that Sport illustrates its author's use of bitter irony to register an acerbic criticism of racial discrimination against Southern blacks. In Sport, after Berry Hamilton, the central figure, is mistakenly accused of theft by his white employer of twenty years and is subsequently sentenced to prison, the remaining members of his family move to New York, where they experience additional problems in the demoralizing metropolis. By focusing on the first six chapters of the novel--that section of the work providing an explanation for the Hamiltons' departure from Virginia--Candela ignores Dunbar's reservation of his sharpest criticism for the evil influence of Northern cities.

Even though the Hamiltons are offered the alternatives of "restraint of the boy in the South and the festering of the soul in the North,"[10] we are never left in doubt as to which alternative the narrator believes more desirable. In fact, Robert Bone provides an important insight into the novel when he observes that "Dunbar's ulterior motives are revealed in a long, didactic passage, which begins by warning of the 'pernicious influence of the city on the untrained Negro.'"[11] Because Sport contains not one, but two long passages on the evils of Northern urban centers, a starting point for a correct evaluation of Dunbar's intentions must take into account his attitudes toward the deceptive attractiveness of cities such as New York to rural black Southerners as these attitudes manifest themselves within the work.

Several critics have detected the influence of American naturalistic novelists in Sport, but this important characteristic has not been thoroughly analyzed.[12] Relating the determinism associated with natu-

ralism to a shift in settings within the novel, Addison Gayle Jr. points out that "like the more experienced naturalists--Zola, Dreiser, and Wright--Dunbar sought only to move his characters from one region to another and to record the effects of a new environment upon them."[13] Dunbar describes New York as a typical, large American city that has the potential to warp the lives of "innocent," aspiring individuals like the hamiltons. When Gayle notes, however, that the Hamiltons and the minor black figures in the Northern setting are "men and women transformed by urban life, so much so that they become a special mass of people, living upon others and taking pride in idleness and poverty,"[14] he directs attention to one major source of interpretive difficulty in the narrative.

A close reading of Sport shows that Dunbar allows his negative judgments on Northern urban life to function in three ways. Within the novel New York becomes (1) a deterministic force that leaves its stultifying impact on the black characters; (2) a backdrop for a description of personal flaws in individual members of the Hamilton family; and (3) the basif for Dunbar's own pessimism concerning the prospects for happiness and achievement for blacks in settings outside the South. At various points in the narrative, each of these functions gives way to another so that frequently we experience conflusion over the extent to which the Hamiltons themselves are held responsible for what happens to them after their migration. Because Joe and Kit display the same negative traits in New York that were apparent to their fellow black townspeople in the South, we have grounds for arguing that the Northern city does not actually shape their lives as much as the narrator suggests. By showing us that Joe and Kit may themselves be culpable for what befalls them, Dunbar offers us a justification for discrediting the narrator's stenuous assertions that Northern cities are centers of evil influence.

Moreover, when we note that the Hamiltons are "treated somewhat in the manner of Hardy's tragic laughing stocks,"[15] we see that the influence of Hardy's fiction on the framework of Sport is just as significant as that of the American naturalists. Dunbar's reliance on Sadness, a black character who functions as a part-time raisonneur and bears a recognizable literary kinship to Little Father Time in Jude the Obscure, signposts an indebtedness to Hardy. Unfortunately, in addition to "borrowing" Sadness for his own thematic purposes, Dunbar turns to absurb polot coincidences and obtrustive narrative interventions to enforce a Hardyean philosophical message at the conclusion of the work: "It was not a happy life, but it was all that was left to them, and they took it up without complaint, or they knew they were powerless against some Will infinitely stronger than their own" (p. 189). Hardy's echo, detected here and elsewhere--together with Dunbar's inability to make the details of the narrative accord with a deterministic philosophy throughout--accounts, to a large extent. for thematic uncertainty in the novel. Just as Hardy is guilty of confusing us in Jude when his narrator attributes the titular character's hardships to malevolent cosmic forces, repressive attitudes in Victorian England, the Fawley family curse, and Jude's own propensity for strong drink and sex, so does Dunbar frustrate us by choosing multiple ways of illuminating the darkness in the lives of his central black personages.

In the first six chapters of Sport, Berry seems victimized by not only his white employer's mistaken accusation but Hardyean coincidence as well. A faithful employee who had always performed his duties well for Maurice Oakley before the accusation, Berry is shocked to learn that he is suspected of having stolen $800 from Oakley's dissolute younger brother. As a result of living frugally, relying on the separate income of

his wife Fanny, and having his children wear the Oakleys' discarded clothes instead of buying them new apparel, Berry mangages to amass $1300 in savings before the alleged theft occurs. Yet, because he happens to deposit these savings only a day before news of the incident reaches the Chief of Police in the Virginia town, he is immediately condemned. Taken away to jail despite Fanny's pleas to Mrs. Oakley, Berry directs to his employer a speech countering the assertion that "no servant is beyond suspicion" (p. 33): "You b'lieve dat I stole f'om dis house aftah all de yeahs I've been in it . . . den, damn you! damn you! ef dat's all dese yeahs counted fu', I wish I had a-stoled it" (pp. 46-47). Even though the evidence against him is merely circumstancial, Berry is nevertheless sent away to prison in a chapter entitled "The Justice of Men."

Under the pen of a black writer with intentions different from those of Dunbar, the above expositional details could have been shaped into a fiction concentrating on the prejudice of white Southerners against blacks. In fact, had Dunbar's narrative ended at this point, we would note a similarity between it and numerous other black protest fictions. After all, Dunbar supplies us with enough hints even this early in the work to convince us that Frank Oakley has squandered monely lent to him by his older brother and has subsequently allowed Berry to be punished for a crime that the honest servant clearly did not commit.

Yet, what sets Sport apart from mainstream black protest literature--and what denies us a basis for reading the novel to find ironic protest throughout--is our recognition of Dunbar's shifting the blame for the fate of the Hamiltons from the Oakleys to both Circumstance and the arrogance of Berry's family. In addition to displaying a Hardyean irony, Berry's having made a large deposit shortly before he is accused

points to Dunbar's use of a characteristic of naturalistic writing to emphasize a discordance between virtue and its supposed rewards. Berry emerges as an unfortunate victim who discovers that his many years of honesty are to be repaid in false charges and incarceration. Like several other protagonists in American naturalistic fiction--e.g., Dr. Trescott in Crane's "The Monster"--he finds that his good deeds subject him to social ostracism and severer censure. Although we do not forget that Frank Oakley's reticence is directly responsible for Berry's confinement, Dunbar's inclusion of naturalistic elements encourages us to contrast the "justice of men" in the description of the character's trial with glaring injustices in a universe in which appropriate rewards and punishments for human actions do not obtain.[16]

In addition, Dunbar includes extensive speculative commentary from the black townspeople on Berry's suspicion of theft to suggest that his imprisonment can almost be deemd a punishment he deserves because of his family's excessive arrogance. Evidence of this reaction is exemplified in Isaac Brown's recollection that before the trial Kit repeatedly snubbed his daughter Minty. Capsulized in the insights of a gossipy old crone, this feeling of resentment toward the Hamiltons in their time of trouble stands out as a judgment on the way that they had set themselves above other members of their race: "W'enevah you see niggahs gittin' so high dat dey own folks ain' good enough for 'em, look out!" (p. 151). This observation is borne out in chapter 6, when Joe is reminded of his former posture of refusing to shave blacks as he unsuccessfully attempts to find employment in black barbershops after his father is sentenced. Like her son, Fanny becomes frustrated by the attitudes of her black neighbors; she decides to leave the town when she sees that townspeople

whom she has known all her life refuse to rent her a house after her eviction from the Oakley cottage.

One major problem in these early chapters is that Dunbar, by emphasizing the way that the Hamiltons are "brought low" as a result of Berry's disgrace, draws attention to not only the unwillingness of the other blacks in the Southern town to befriend them but the Hamiltons' own flaws. Because their arrogance once again manifests itself in New York upon Minty's arrival, we note a confusion in Dunbar's motives for focusing on their pride and its repercussions at the same time that he describes the injustices of the Oakleys and other Southern whites. Thus, we find more than one explanation for the necessity of the Hamiltons' migration to New York, a city that they believe holds a promise of being the "center of all the glory, all the wealth, and all the freedom of the world" (p. 68).

The Hamiltons' expectations of what the Northern city has to offer are reminiscent of young Jude's determination to visit the "heavenly Jerusalem" of Christminister after he climbs upon a ladder to see the lights of that distant college town from his lofty perspective in the small village of Marygreen. Hardy dashes the hopes of his protagonist in those sections of Jude set in Christminster; similarly, Dunbar prepares us for the disappointments that Berry's family will encounter. This dim foreshadowing is accentuated in chapter 7 in the narrator's comments on what newcomers are likely to experience in New York:

> To the provincial coming to New York for the first time, ignorant and unknown, the city presents a notable mingling of the qualities of cheerfulness and gloom. . . . A new emotion will take his heart as the people hasten by him, a feeling of loneliness almost of grief, that with all of these souls about him he knows not one and not one of them cares for him. After a while he will find a place and give a sigh of relief as he settles

> away from the city's sights behind his cozy blinds. It is better here, and the city is cruel and cold and unfeeling. This he will feel, perhaps, for the first half hour, and then he will be out in it all again. . . . Then, if he be wise, he will go away, any place--yes, he will even go over to Jersey. But if he be a fool, he will stay and stay on until the town becomes all in all to him. (pp. 70-71).

Although the warning in the above passage is racially unspecific, Dunbar's shaping vision commits him to a description of the ways in which a cruel Will in an uncaring universe is much more hostile to blacks than to whites. Yet, instead of measuring the frustrations of blacks in an unfamiliar large city against the problems that whites might encounter under similar circumstances, Dunbar chooses to reduce the dimensions of the strange new setting to entertainment centers in Harlem. Accordingly, the view of New York presented in the novel is one in which a lone white Negrophile appears.[17] Although a larger frame of reference is clearly required, the negative influence of the city on the Hamiltons is surveyed from the restricted viewpoint of the Banner Club, a Harlem night spot.

The narrator's comments clarify the special enticement that the nightclub offers to Joe, who visits the establishment soon after his arrival in the North:

> Of course, the place was a social cesspool, generating a poisonous miasma and reeking with the stench of decayed and rotten moralities. There is no defense to be made for it. But what do you expect when false idealism and fevered ambition come face to face with catering cupidity? It was into this atmosphere that Thomas had introduced the boy Joe, and he sat there now by his side, firing his mind and pointing out the different celebrities who came in and telling highly flavored stories of their lives or doings. Joe heard things that had never come within the range of his mind before. (p. 95)

Additonally, through Dunbar's dependence on Sadness, a morose, substitute center of consciousness within the novel, we learn that the club has a special appeal to members of a particular class of blacks, those who prey upon one another in a "fraternity of indolence" (p. 116). Such commentary is designed, of course, to convince us that the city holds a powerful and potentially destructive influence over not only Joe but Kit, who, like her brother, is attracted to black stage life. For Dunbar, the commentary was apparently meant to illustrate that the "environment is a tremendous thing in the world, and can shape lives regardless."[18]

Nevertheless, even though Dunbar attempts to manipulate some of the familiar characteristics of naturalism in Sport to highlight his interest in depicting "festering" black lives in Northern settings, he also shows us that his characters themselves, rather than the environment, are chiefly responsible for their own misfortunes. In regard to Joe, the narrator informs us that "one might find it in him to feel sorry for this small-souled, warped being, for he was so evidently the jest of Fate, if it were not that he was so blissfully, so conceitedly unconscious of his own nastiness" (p. 83). This strong indictment against Berry's son bears relevance when we consider the circumstances leading up to his murder of Hattie Sterling. A character who, like Jude, allows his need for alcohol and sex to overwhelm him, Joe strangles Hattie because she rejects him after tiring of lecturing him on his inveterate drunkenness. Because the narrator emphasizes a number of Joe's personal weaknesses, and because the narrative fails to isolate New York as the major cause of his depravity, we have an abundance of evidence to convince us that the "disaster which overtakes him in New York is of his making, more attributable to the exercise of free will, than to the mythology of environmental determinism."[19]

Similarly, Kit displays the same weaknesses in character in New York that were evident to the black background figures in the South. After she learns that Joe has acknowledged guilt for Hattie's murder, she stops sending Fanny money to pay for an attorney and consoles herself with the reflection that "it was for the best" (p. 162). Her chief concern is that the scandal surrounding her brother may hurt her career. A selfish individual whose vanity increases after she becomes a Harlem dancer, Kit seeks in the North a life "in which the chief aim was the possession of good clothes and the ability to attract attention which she had learned to crave" (p. 162).[20] Significantly, Dunbar punishes her for being self-centered. We learn that shortly after she reaches the height of her popularity, her nerves strain, her health deteriorates, and her beauty begins to fade.

In addition, Fanny is guilty of overweening pride, and this flaw in her character gains notice when we recall that New York does not appear to alter her strong sense of moral values. Although she takes a new husband during Berry's confinement, she has legal grounds for so doing and is embarrassed when she confronts the protagonist upon his release. The repercussions of her pride are evident in a description of Minty's appearance in the North. Like one of Hardy's "Mephistophelian visitants," characters who invade fictions to change the course of events while seriously affecting other characters' lives,[21] Minty finds her way to Fanny's boarding house but is denied admission to the Hamiltons' apartment. Stung by this act of insolence, she retaliates by informing the landlady of Berry's disgrace and then encourages her to ask Fanny to move from the house.

Fanny's pride, Kit's vanity, and Joe's idleness and alcoholism are personality traits that we can easily argue are not properly attributable

to the influence of either New York or any other Northern urban setting. Their inclusion in Sport presents a complication that causes us to question the degree of authority that Dunbar has over his narrative as we evaluate his efforts to outline various circumstances darkening the lives of his black characters. Our confusion is compounded in chapter 15, entitled "Dear, Damned, Delightful Town," when Sadness voices a second warning against the migration of Southern blacks to the North. After his arrest Joe is viewed as

> . . . only one more who had got into the whirlpool and enjoyed the sensation for a moment, and then swept dizzily down. There were, indeed, some who for an earnest hour sermonized about it and said, "Here is another example of the pernicious influence of the city on untrained Negroes. Oh, is there no way to keep these people from rushing away from the small villages and country districts of the South up to the cities, where they cannot battle with the terrible force of a strange and unusual environment? Is there no way to prove to them that woolen-shirted, brown-jeaned simplicity is infinitely better than broad-clothed degradadation?" They wanted to preach to these people that good agriculture is better than bad art, that it was better and nobler for them to sing to God across Southern fields than to dance for rowdies in Northern halls. They wanted to dare to say that the South has its faults--no one condones them--and its disadvantages, but that even whay they suffered from these was better than what awaited them in the great alleys of New York. Down there, the bodies were restrained, and they chafed; but here the soul would fester, and for even while they exclaimed they knew that there was no way, and that the stream of young Negro life would continue to flow up from the South, dashing itself against the hard necessities of the city and breaking like waves against a rock, that, until the gods grew tired of their cruel sport, there must still be sacrifices to false ideals and unreal ambitions. (pp. 159-60)

This modified sermon offers us an explanation for the title of the work. The Hamiltons become "sports of the gods" as a consequence of their having left the South--and this despite a white Southerner's vil-

lainy having been one significant determinant that forced them to do so. What also strikes us about the passage, however, is the extent to which it offers an unearned explanation for what certain details in the narrative indicate. In spite of the assertion that New York wields a powerful negative influence over "untrained Negroes," we sense that Joe's tonsorial skills and Fanny's years of exprience in domestic employment should have adequately prepared them for an adjustment in environmental circumstances. If by "untrained" Dunbar actually means "uneducated," he denies us an opportunity to evaluate this judgment by withholding information concerning the educational levels of the Hamiltons--and beyond this--information concerning the educational achievements of Northern blacks. What Dunbar actually gives us in the passage above is evidence of the way that the environment and the Hamiltons' personal weaknesses are subordinated to his own assertive yet extraneous theories about American regional sociology.

In the last few pages of the novel, Dunbar's dualism of purpose presents us with an ambiguous conclusion. After a white newspaper reporter's coverage of Berry's conviction becomes instrumental in bringing about the protagonist's release from prison, Berry locates Fanny in New York and discovers that she has remarried. Hardyean coincidence, however, effects a turn in the plot when Fanny's new husband is killed in a fight only a few days after Berry's interview with his former wife. After the reunited couple weigh the alternatives of remaining in the North or returning to the South, they decide to move back to Virginia, where they settle within earshot of the ravings of a now mentally-ill Maurice Oakley. In terms of the implications of the second didactic passage, Berry and Fanny should be happier back in the South, yet the ending informs us that

this is not the case. On the other hand, although we have a basis for speculating that blacks mistreated like the Hamiltons might with justification still hold some animosity toward the Oakleys, even after five years, no evidence of ill-will appears. Instead, the ending of Sport is similar to the conclusions of shorter, earlier works of fiction by Dunbar, in which the posture of the narrators is to urge blacks to forgive white Americans--and particularly white Southerners--for previous wrongs.[22] Significantly, another characteristic of these earlier works is to condemn Northern cities in general and white liberals in specific for deceiving blacks about the potential for achievement above the Mason-Dixon line.

Although Dunbar has numerous opportunities within Sport to hold the Oakley family accountable for the Hamiltons' hardships, several readers have noted that he offers us ameliorative depictions of these Southern whites. Frank Oakley confesses that Berry is innocent in a letter to his brother, and Maurice keeps this letter pinned to his clothing for several years--not because of his hatred of Berry in specific or of blacks in general, but because of his wounded pride. Unable to come to terms with his younger brother's dishonesty, Maurice becomes a guilt-ridden figure reminiscent of Hawthorne's Arthur Dimmesdale. In allowing one brother to write a lengthy acknowledgment of wrongdoing and the other to experience a nervous breakdown, Dunbar structures the novel to encourage the reader to soften his responses to both. In addition, Dunbar urges us to forgive Mrs. Oakley. At the end of the narrative, she promises to place Berry and Fanny in comfort in a refurbished cottage for the rest of their lives.

Moreover, we note that Dunbar has a white reporter whom Berry and Fanny have never met travel from New York to Virginia to correct the miscarriage of justice to the black protagonist and that the most prejudiced characters in the novel unwittingly provide the reporter with information

he needs to have Berry's case reopened. Nowhere in Sport does Dunbar stridently condemn the actions of whites toward blacks. In fact, after the first six chapters descriptions of interracial disharmony are clearly subordinated to anti-Northern propaganda.

Where there should be an overall structural unity in the novel, we find instead evidence of bifurcated uncertainty. After beginning the narrative with an engaging account of the problems that Berry faces in the Virginia town, Dunbar seems unsure of how he wants the Hamiltons' traumatic experiences in the South to relate to the total design of the work. Because most readers will find it easier to link the frustrations of Berry's family to the duplicity of the Oakleys rather than to environmental elements in New York, sustained plot interest and interpretive concentration will most likely focus on the earlier scenes. Yet, Dunbar incorporates most of his rhetoric into the latter chapters of Sport.

Additionally, we face a difficulty in pardoning Dunbar for having the Hamiltons stand apart from not only white characters but other blacks, against whom--for the sake of logical consistency--a racially biased cosmic malevolence might be expected to work with equal force. In the early chapters Dunbar confuses us about the relationship of the Hamiltons to their black neighbors. The narrator informs us that Berry and his family are "dickty" and that the background black figures are unsympathetic upon learning of Berry's disgrace, but we are also told that the protagonist was the treasurer of a black fraternal order before his arrest and that the other members of this brotherhood acknowledged that there were no irregularities in his ledgers. Left cloudy throughout the novel is the degree of racial representativeness that Dunbar wanted to ascribe to the central characters, blacks taken advantage of by whites but also criticized harshly by other members of their race.

These flaws in both the conception and working out of the novel show us that troublesome characterizations combine with a surplus of not-carefully-thought-out intentions to give us a multitonal work of misdirected creativity. Too often the narrative appears to divide itself, thematically as well as structurally, into separable Northern and Southern threads. An overly ambitious last effort in fiction in which Dunbar dips in and out of naturalism and displays a fondness for Hardyean techniques, Sport frustrates the attempts of even its most sympathetic readers to find coherence and authorial control within its pages of unfortunate, borrowed obscurity.[23]

Notes

[1] In his introduction to Lyrics of Lowly Life, Dunbar's first published collection of poems, Howells praises Dunbar's dialect verse at the expense of the black writer's poetry in standard English: "One sees how the poet exults in his material as the artst always does; it is not for him to blink its commonness, or to be ashed of its rudeness, and in his treatment of it he has been able to bring us nearer to the heart of primitive human nature in his race than anyone else has yet done. The range between appetite and emotion is not great, but it is here that his race has hitherto had its being, with a lift now and then far above and beyond it." Howells' comments are cited in Peter Revell, Paul Laurence Dunbar (Boston: Twayne, 1979), p. 90.

[2] Revell, p. i.

[3] Kenny Williams, "The Masking of the Novelist," in A Singer in the Dawn: Reinterpretations of Paul Laurence Dunbar, ed. Jay Martin (New York: Dodd, 1975), p. 202.

[4] Williams, p. 202.

[5] Addison Gayle Jr., "Literature as Catharsis: The Novels of Paul Laurence Dunbar," in Martin, pp. 140-41.

[6] Native Sons: A Critical Study (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1968), pp. 29-30.

[7] My source is Paul Laurence Dunbar, The Sport of the Gods, introd. Charles Nilon, paperback edition (1902; New York: Macmillan, 1970). Subsequent references are indicated parenthetically in the text.

[8] "We Wear the Mask: Irony in Dunbar's The Sport of the Gods," American Literature, 48 (March 1976), 60-72. Candela's uncertain approach leads him to conclude that the "satiric attack that the narrator unleashes at [the] Southern town in chapter 5 falls less heavily on the black sector than the white" (p. 67) without explaining why Dunbar would want to attack his black characters. He notes that Dunbar's subtle use of language illustrates a "bitter, profound irony" and that this ironic dimension "places bigoted whites' notions into their own mouths" (p. 69). Yet, he also observes that Dunbar mimics black dialect at several points in the novel.

[9] "Paul Laurence Dunbar: The Rejected Symbol," Journal of Negro History, 52 (January 1967), 4. Both Turner and Candela fail to provide the reader with a reliable basis for identifying "ironic protest" in fiction. Thus, we are left to assume that protest through the tricky literary vehicle of irony rests upon presumptions of what black novelists should have thought about the interrelationships between their black and white characters.

[10] Turner, p. 9.

[11] The Negro Novel in America, rev. ed (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1965), p. 42.

[12] In addition to the commentary by Gayle (cited below, note 14), see Nilson's brief comparison of Dunbar's technique with that of Norris, Sinclair, and London in his introduction to the source and Candela's identification of the "fear / fascination of America's cities" evidenced in the works of such writers as Dreiser. See Candela's footnote, p. 71. In "The Novels of Paul Laurence Dunbar," Phylon, 29 (Autumn 1968), 257-71, Charles R. Larson finds parallels between Dunbar's naturalistic technique and the methods of Norris in McTeague but is unclear about whether Dunbar had actually read the white novelist's fiction. Recognizable naturalistic touches appear in Dunbar's description of the "yellow journalism" exposing the racial double standard of justice in the Virginia town and in his naming the reporter's newspaper "The Universe."

[13] The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), p. 46. Regrettably, Gayle is mistaken when he asserts that at the conclusion of the novel "Maurice is dead of a heart attack and a guilty conscience" (p. 45).

[14] Gayle, The Way of the New World, p. 46.

[15] Sterling Brown, The Negro in American Fiction (New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 78. Of course, the common ground between the American naturalistic writers and Hardy is the influence of Emile Zola.

[16] For a discussion of this characteristic of naturalistic writing, see Charles C. Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood, 1976), especially pp. 67-70.

[17] This factor should be taken into account when one notes that a recent paperback edition of the novel mistakenly describes it as the "first portrayal of Negro life in Harlem" and the "first major protest novel written by a black American." In his introduction to another recent paperback edition of Sport, Kenny Williams indicates that the novel was a forerunner of the popular "Harlem fiction" associated with the Negro Renaissance; see Williams' introduction to Sport (1901; New York: Dodd, 1981), p. 21. For a corrective approach, see Eugene Arden, "The Early Harlem Novel," Phylon, 20 (1959), 25-31. Arden points out that the Ham-

iltons did not settle in Harlem and that Sport is inaccurately categorized as a "Harlem novel": "At the time Dunbar wrote his novel, there was not yet a Harlem as we know it today. Just after the turn of the century, most of New York's Negroes lived in cramped quarters near the Pennsylvania Railroad Station (the region to which the Hamilton family went on arrival), or else wedged in amongst the Irish on San Juan Hill. Another colony existed on West 53rd Street, but the Negroes there were mainly stage folk, musicians, and journalists--and even there the over-crowding was notorious" (p. 26).

[18] This well-known brief summary of naturalistic philosophy is attributed to Stephen Crane and is cited in Larzer Ziff, The American 1890's: Life and Times of a Lost Generation (New York: Viking, 1966), p. 91.

[19] Gayle, The Way of the New World, p. 46. Unfortunately, one consequence of the troublesome characterization is that it unintentionally gives credence to the assertions early in the novel by white Southerners that depravity and irresponsibility are inherent in blacks. Readers will discover other "loose ends" in the novel. For a discussion of these additional informational gaps in the narrative, see Larson, p. 271.

[20] In several ways Kit bears a literary resemblance to Hardy's Arabella Fermor in Jude. Both characters are opportunists. Just as Kit desires to improve her social status in New York, so does Arabella remind herself of her low standing as a pigkeeper's daughter when she strategizes an ultimately successful scheme to entrap Jude into marriage. Whereas Kit is fond of clothes, Arabella, in marrying Jude, seeks a "husband with a lot of earning power in him for buying her frocks and hats."

[21] See J.O. Bailey, "Hardy's Mephistophelian Visitants," PMLA, 61 (December 1946), 1164-84.

[22] See Turner, pp. 5-8.

[23] This discussion of the novel originally appeared in a radically different form as "Blackness and Borrowed Obscurity: Another Look at Dunbar's The Sport of the Gods," Callaloo, 4 (1981), 90-100 (copyright Hurd).

CHAPTER III

Characterization and Complexity in Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man

When Robert Bone singles out James Weldon Johnson, author of The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1902),[1] as the "only true artist among the early Negro novelists,"[2] he praises Johnson as a man of letters whose craftsmanship surpasses that of both Dunbar and Chesnutt. The Autobiography presents us with a complex fictive structure highlighting the narrator's status as a tragic mulatto placed on a marginal line in American society. Although the narrative is indeed a novel, it poses as an autobiography, resembles a sermon, presents episodic adventures, and manipulates elements of the "romance of a genteel hero" popular with late-nineteenth-century American readers.[3] Early appraisals of Johnson's achievement found that he had given his audience a "composite and proportionate presentation of the entire race, embracing all of its various groups and elements, showing their relation to the whites." These readers discovered a "view of the inner life of the Negro in America" and became "initiated into the freemasonry, as it were, of the race."[4]

More recent scholarly commentary on The Autobiography, however, has questioned the objectivity of the portraiture of black life in the work. Of major interpretive concern is Johnson's narrative distance from his central figure. Several irogenic estimations of the novel have suggested that the ex-coloured man is a morally obtuse protagonist serving as a

"negative exemplar" of racial pride and emerging as an unreliable narrator whose opinions, viewpoints,and judgments are to be distrusted.[5] This approach heavily emphasizes his alleged racial apostasy at the end of the work but fails to take into account Johnson's reliance on him to espouse his own views on American interracial relationships. The protagonist gives up his early dream of becoming a "great coloured man, to reflect credit to the race" (p. 46) when he marries a beautiful white woman, but Johnson is careful to show us that the narrator is uncertain about having made a wise decision:

> Sometimes it seems to me that I have never really been a Negro, that I have been only a privileged spectator of their inner life; at other times I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter, and I am possessed by a strange longing for my own people. . . . My love for my children makes me glad that I am what I am and keeps me from desiring to be otherwise; and yet, when I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast-yellowing [musical] manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, hat I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage. (pp. 210-11)

The ambiguities and complexities surround Johnson's narrator / spokesman are intentional rather than inadvertent. Bone's recognition of Johnson's unwillingness to "suppress a desire to educate the white folks"[6] offers a crucial insight into the effectiveness of Johnson's strategies. The "I" in the novel gives us commentaries from the perspective of an outside observer who assimilates information gathered from conversations with members of his mother's race, not as a self-conscious black who voluntarily surrenders his blackness after observing shortcomings and unattractive characteristics of Afro-Americans. In chapter 10 the narrator engages in an <u>occupatio</u> to comment on the narrow range of

black characterizations in then-popular fictions by white authors. Significantly, this aesthetically self-referential passage points to Johnson's corrective aims in The Autobiography:

> [The] generally accepted literary ideal of the American Negro constitutes what is really an obstacle in the way of the thoughtful and progressive element of the race. His character has been established as a happy-go-lucky, laughing, shuffling, banjo-picking being, and the reading public has not yet been prevailed upon to take him seriously. His efforts to elevate himself socially are looked upon as a sort of absurd caricature of "white civilization." A novel dealing with coloured people who lived in respectable homes and amidst a fair degree of culture and who naturally acted "just like white folks" would be taken in a comic-opera sense. In this respect the Negro is much in the position of a great comedian who gives up the lighter roles to play tragedy. No matter how well he may portray the deeper passions, the public is loath to give him up in his old character; they even conspire to make him a failure in serious work in order to force him back into comedy. In the same respect, the public is not too much to be blamed, for great comedians are far more scarce than mediocre tragedians; every amateur actor is a tragedian. . . . However, this very fact constitutes the opportunity of the future Negro novelist and poet to give the country something new and unknown, in depicting the life, the ambitions, the struggles, and the passions of those of their race who are striving to break the narrow limits of traditions. A beginning has already been made in that remarkable book by Dr. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk. (pp. 168-69)

Key words in the passage indicate that Johnson will offer a characterization "new and unknown" through a depiction of a protagonist exemplifying the virtues of "Talented Tenth" blacks, described in Du Bois' work as Americans of African descent illustrating the most noteworthy achievements of their race. A corrective to the images of blacks drawn by white authors of the last century, the ex-coloured man, who would have been classified legally as a black in many Southern states because of his mixed racial background, shows that he is worthy of associating with middle-class whites. Within the narrative he gains renown as a versatile pianist,

speculates successfully on New York City real estate, and masters Spanish, French, and German autodidactically.

The usefulness of this special characterization "lies largely in the fact that the mulatto [narrator] is 'like' a white man yet is not one. Because the largely white reading public can identify with him, though they know he is not white, they can at least sense in a more personal manner the social and psychological tensions generated by racial antagonism."[7] The child of a white upper-middle-class father, the protagonist accentuates the ultimate impact of these tensions at the conclusion of the work by by setting monetary and educational attainments that come from his passing for white over against the loss of important artifacts, the most significant of which is his love of ragtime music. The double purpose, then, of counterbalancing these gains and losses is to showcase sophisticated and respected blacks in this country and to emphasize that even though the "American racial scheme produced great injustices, blacks had endured and had made contributions of unique value to American culture."[8]

Johnson's strategy also involved a manipulation of the emotional responses of his specifically targeted white readers.[9] He shapes his narrative to endourage a dual reaction of admiration and sympathy for the protagonist so that this reaction "reflects the untenable position in which the narrator finds himself emotionally; having won cultural respectability, wealth, the love of the fair heroine, he wonders if it was all worth it."[10] At the conclusion of the narrative, the ex-coloured man is a confused figure who has shuttled between the isolable worlds of white and black America. Johnson, however, never indicts the narrator for this confusion and never destroys compassion "for the mulatto trapped by

white values. . . . In this sense the ex-coloured man is as much victim as hypocrite, as much a sensitive questioner of his life as a masquerader; he is not a man hiding his motives as much as a man searching his past for the sources of his alienation."[11]

In the early chapters Johnson relates the actions and describes the impressions of his young protagonist from alternating temporal perspectives. In addition to providing us with details of his being shocked into a recognition of his blackness and illegitimacy, the narrator stresses the sociological implications of these revelations from the vantage point of a much older individual who remembers their painful psychological stultification. The effect of these shifts in viewpoint is to poise the first section of the work between a Bildungsroman and a "didactic essay."[12]

The titular character informs us that he was born in Georgia and that at an early age he moved with his mother to a Connecticut house where her popularity as a seamstress allowed them to live in relative comfort. Although he also recalls having made the trip with his father, the image of the white man is only faintly outlined in symbols attesting to the latter's wealth. The narrator remembers that the tall figure with a moustache gave him a ten-dollar gold piece with a hole in it to be worn around his neck, wore shiny boots, and carried a gold watch and gold chain. Much clearer are memories of his mother's playing Southern songs by heart on a piano. He develops a deep interest in music, an interest shared only with his love of books. Imaginative as a child, he looks at pictures and "substitutes whole sentences and even paragraphs from what meaning [he] thought they conveyed" (p. 9). Not knowing other children his age, he creates fantasy playmates and becomes a loner.

When the young protagonist enters elementary school, he fails to attach himself to any of his classmates but establishes a weak friendship with Shiny, the darkest and smartest child in the class, and with Red, a slow white youth whom he eventually pulls along from grade to grade. One day when his teacher asks all the white children in the room to stand, the narrator rises but is gently told to sit down and wait to stand with the other black pupils. Confused and shocked, he later listens to the white classmates taunt him and subsequently rushes home to his mother with a burning question: "Mother, mother, tell me, am I a nigger?" (p. 11). An experience that threatens his psychological security, the day of embarrassment at school stands out as a "sword thrust . . . which was years in healing" (p. 19).

In his role as reflective narrator, the ex-coloured man looks back on this day of infamy as the beginning of his tragedy. Because it had almost moved him from a subjective to an objective awareness of his black identity, he uses the incident to exemplify the "dwarfing, warping, distorting influence" of a black man's double consciousness in America:

> He is forced to take this outlook on all things, not from the view-point of a citizen, or a man, or even a human being, but from the view-point of a coloured man. It is wonderful to me that the race has progressed so broadly as it has, since most of its thought and all of its activity must run through the narrow neck of this one funnel.
>
> And it is this, too, which makes the coloured people of this country, in reality, a mystery to the whites. It is a difficult thing for a white man to learn what a coloured man really thinks; because, generally, with the latter an additional and different light must be brought to bear on what he thinks; and his thoughts are often influenced by considerations so delicate and subtle that it would be impossible for him to confess or explain them to one of the opposite race. This gives to every coloured man, in proportion to his intellectuality, a sort of dual personality; there is one phase of him which is disclosed only in the freemasonry of his own race. I have often watched with interest and

> sometimes with amazement even ignorant coloured men under cover of broad grins and minstrel antics maintain this dualism in the presence of white men. (pp. 21-22)

After the painful schoolroom event the narrator isolates himself from his classmates and buries himself in books. In addition to a history of the United States and Pilgrim's Progress, he reads Uncle Tom's Cabin, a work that he vituperates because of its "foolishly good" titular figure. Yet, he also discovers that Alexander Dumas is black and feels a double pride when Shiny delivers a farewell speech on Toussaint L'Ouverture at his grammar-school graduation: "I not only shared the enthusiasm of his audience, but he imparted to me some of his own enthusiasm. I felt leap within me pride that I was coloured; and I began to form wild dreams of bringing glory and honour to the Negro race" (p. 46). The money that he earns from a benefit concert shortly after his mother's death gives him an opportunity to fulfill these aspirations. Yet, the dreams are indeed wild because his knowledge of blacks comes from textbooks and because the "always too strongly individual" (p. 129) perceptions of this sensitive high-school graduate have at this point formulated "only a faint knowledge of prejudice and no idea at all how it ramified and affected our entire social organism" (p. 36). Nevertheless, he plans a trip to the South to enroll in Atlanta University (Johnson's alma mater) rather than matriculate in Harvard or Yale. In preparing for his journey he visualizes a land of pastoral splendor where his quest for a formal education will allow him to transform his dreams into realities.

As the narrator travels farther and farther below Washington, D.C., he becomes more and more disenchanted with the Southern scenery and begins to acknowledge that what he actually sees contrasts sharply with the

"luxuriant, semi-tropical" settings that he had pictured in his mind. Upon arriving in Atlanta, he is particularly taken aback by the heavy, unfamiliar accents of the blacks with whom he talks. Learning that he must sleep in cramped quarters on a cot only recently vacated by another lodger, he is puzzled to discover that these are the best accommodations that a black newcomer to Georgia can expect. In addition; his efforts to secure a good meal end in frustration as he surveys an unsanitary eating house in the black section of the city. Yet, his greatest sense of humiliation comes when he notices throngs of lower-class black Atlantans who appear to live in the streets:

> I had seen little squads around the railroad station on my way south, but here I saw a street crowded with them. They filled the shops and thronged the sidewalks and lined the curb. I asked my companion if all the coloured people in Atlanta lived in this street. He said they did not and assured me that the ones I saw were of the lower class. I felt relieved, in spite of the size of the lower class. (p. 55)

Particularly offensive is the "unkempt appearance, the stumbling, slouching gait and loud talk and laughter of these people," and this tableau arouses within him a "feeling of almost repulsion" (p. 56). Still, his animosity is offset by his interest in their vernacular and sense of humor. In his reflective mode the narrator comments that this latter characteristic supplies the Southern blacks with an effective means of subordinating their anger and anxieties: "I have since learned that this ability to laugh heartily is, in part, the salvation of the American Negro; it does much to help him from going the way of the Indian" (p. 56).

After his distressful encounter with the blacks in the streets, he finds the warmth of the proprietress of a cottage in the better section of the black community especially welcome. Reminiscent of Harlemite Mary

Rambo in Ellison's Invisible Man, this model of "motherly kindness" seems "picturesquely beautiful" with her "round face beaming" above a "spotless white apron and coloured head-handkerchief" (p. 59). As he sits down to a feast of good Southern food, he feels as if he can "lay [his] head on her capacious bosom and go to sleep" (p. 59).

A more attractive picture of black Atlanta continues to emerge when he visits the college, talks briefly with its president, and attends a welcoming ceremony for new students in its auditorium. In the large hall he sees a range of colors--from black to white--on the predominantly intellectual faces of the students. Yet, the ex-coloured man soon learns that he will have to forego his plans to attend the school and thus delay the fulfillment of his ambitions. Upon his return to his place of lodging, he finds that someone has rifled his trunk and taken the money set aside for his tuition. Without friends or means to support himself, he is forced to follow the suggestion of a Pullman porter to travel to Jacksonville to look for work, and he cramps himself in the porter's closet on this unexpected trip.

That the ex-coloured man moves closer to accepting the objective reality of his blackness is evident in his asking for directions to a "boarding house for coloured people" (p. 66) as soon as he enters the Florida city (Johnson's birthplace). He quickly secures employmnet as a roller in a cigar factory and, from listening to conversations between his Cuban fellow lodgers, he becomes proficient enough in Spanish to be elevated the position of noontime reader for the other employees. To supplement his earnings, he offers private music lessons to middle-class blacks, an activity that provides his true "entrance into the race": "I had formulated a theory of what it was to be coloured; now I was getting the practice" (p. 74). His familiarity with respectable Jacksonville

blacks allows him to clarify for the reader the struggles that characterize interracial relations in this country:

> It is a struggle; for though the black man fights passively, he nevertheless fights; and his passive resistance is more effective at present than active resistance could possibly be. He bears the fury of the storm as does the willow tree. It is a struggle; for though the white man of the South may be too proud to admit it, he is, nevertheless, using in the contest his best energies; he is devoting to it the greater part of this thought and much of his endeavour. The South today stands panting and almost breathless from his exertions. And how the sense of struggle has shifted! The battle was first waged over the right of the Negro to be classed as a human being with a soul; later, as to whether he had sufficient intellect to master even the rudiments of learning; and today it is being fought over his social recognition. (p. 75)

Additionally, his cameraderie with the Jacksonville blacks enables him to distinguish the lowest class of Negroes from two other groups on higher socio-economic levels, distinctions he makes on the basis of the relations of each group with whites. The lowest group of blacks makes up a "desperate class" of men and women who "cherish a sullen hatred of all white men" and "value life as cheap" (p. 78). He notes, however, that members of this group are "but the creatures of conditions, as much as the slum and criminal elements of all the great cities of the world are creatures of conditions" (p. 77). The narrator places within the second grouping all blacks connected with whites through domestic employment. The third group is composed of well-to-do, educated blacks who have the option of living with as little contact with whites as possible. He observes that "if a coloured man wanted to separate himself from his white neighbors, he had but to acquire some money, education, and culture, and to live in accordance" (p. 79). He also finds that the prevailing racial sentiment of this group "is far from being one long groan about their condition" (p. 81).

When the cigar factory closes unexpectedly, the narrator realizes that he must leave Jacksonville and subsequently gives up all thoughts of proposing marriage to a young teacher. When he once again sees the porter who had lent him money and smuggled him aboard the train to Florida, he has justification for feeling betrayed by a member of his mother's race. The porter has on the same symbolic black and grey tie that the ex-coloured man recognizes as one of the items stolen from his trunk. His disappointment, though, does not prevent him from enumerating for his white readers the four greatest achievements of Afro-Americans. He lists the folktales collected as Uncle Remus stories, the Jubilee songs popularized by students at Fisk University, ragtime music, and the cakewalk. Of course, the narrator's love of music biases his choices, but the primary criterion for his selections is their universal appeal. Aware of the opportunities he would have in New York to become a successful ragtime piano player, he decides to end his three-year stay in the South, the site of his recently acquired knowledge of blacks.

Dunbar's narrator presents us with a negative image of New York in The Sport of the Gods; similarly, the ex-coloured man describes the large Northeastern city as the "most fatally fascinating thing in America. She sits like a great witch at the gate of the country, showing her alluring white face and hiding her crooked hands and feet under the folds of her white garments--constantly inviting thousands from within, and tempting those who come from across the seas to go no farther" (p. 89). Caught up in the corruptive influence of the strange new city, the narrator begins to frequent a popular gambling house in the Tenderloin section of Manhattan. His luck at the crap table determining how and where he will sleep each night, he quickly learns to accustom himself to alternating streaks of good and bad luck. When friends take him to an after-hours club serv-

ing liquor, he divides his time between the two establishments, the latter being a night spot where wealthy whites mix freely with respectable blacks. Seated at the club's piano one night, he plays spirited ragtime pieces that cause the clientele to gather around him. Soon his musical talent attracts the notice of a wealthy white man who tips him generously for his syncopated renditions of Mendelssohn's "Wedding March" and other classical works.

Unfortunately, his accomplishments also draw the attention of a rich widow, one of several white women who come to the club paired with black gigolos. While seated at the widow's table one evening, he witnesses her black companion's shooting her through the throat. To avoid being implicated in the murder, he accepts a proposal from the prosperous admirer of his music to sail to Europe and to play in the great cities on the Continent for the friends of this prospective patron.

Although the narrator finds it difficult to get used to being awakened at all hours of the night to play music, he otherwise has no misgivings about making the European tour with his benefactor, who regards him "as an equal, not as a servant" (p. 130). He becomes unsettled, however, in a Parisian theater one night while attending a performance of Faust. He finds in the seat next to him an attractive young white woman and next to her a well-dressed gentleman whom he recognizes as his father. The proximity of the young woman, whom he guesses is his sister, underscores the "desolate loneliness" of his peculiar situation. Stumbling out of the theater, he drinks himself into a stupor as he reflects on his racial displacement.

In Germany, while entertaining some of his patron's guests with energetic classical pieces, the narrator listens in astonishment as a young European reverses the process by playing ragtime pieces in the classical

manner. This achievement, along with his tiring of Europe, encourages the ex-coloured man to summon up enough courage to tell his benefactor that he wants to return to the United States--not to the East Coast, but back to the South to realize his goals by developing his musical virtuosity. When the benefactor hears this decision, he attempts to discourage the protagonist from making the trip and gives him a long speech emphasizing the extent to which the ex-coloured man has already been conditioned to accept a white American value system:

> My boy, you are by blood, by appearance, by education, and by tastes a white man. Now, why do you want to throw your life away amidst the poverty and ignorance, in the hopeless struggle of the black people of the United States? Then look at the terrible handicap you are placing on yourself by going home and working as a Negro composer; you can never be able to get the hearing for your work which it might deserve. I doubt that even a white musician of recognized ability could succeed there by working on the theory that American music should be based on Negro themes. Music is a universal art; anybody's music belongs to everybody; you can't limit it to race or country. Now, if you want to become a composer, why not stay right here in Europe? I will put you under the best teacher on the Continent. Then if you want to write music on Negro themes, why, go ahead and do it. . . . This idea you have of making a Negro out of yourself is nothing more than a sentiment; and you do not realize the fearful import of what you intend to do. What kind of a Negro would you make now, especially in the South? If you had remained there, or perhaps even in your club in New York, you might have succeeded very well; but now you would be miserable. I can imagine no more dissatisfied human being than an educated, cultured, and refined coloured man in the United States. I have given more study to the race question in the United States than you may suppose, and I sympathize with the Negroes there; but what's the use? I can't right their wrongs, and neither can you; they must do that themselves. They are unfortunate in having wrongs to right, and you would be foolish to take their wrongs unnecessarily on your shoulders. Perhaps some day, through study and observation, you will come to see that evil is a force, and, like the physical and chemical forces, we cannot annihilate it; we may only change its form. . . . My philosophy of life is this: make yourself as happy as possible, and try to make those happy whose lives come in touch

> with yours; but to attempt to right the wrongs and ease the sufferings of the world in general is a waste of effort. You had just as well try to bale the Atlantic by pouring the water into the Pacific. (pp. 144-46)

Finally overcoming these objections, even though he considers the possibility that he may be making a potentially "fatal mistake," the narrator resolves to detach himself from the patron, who had seemed to hold a superhuman power over him. Uncertain whether his determination to revisit the South is motivated by a commitment to help other blacks or an interest in distinguishing himself individually, he is sure that one force strongly pulling back to his native land is an "unselfish desire to voice all the joys and sorrows, the hopes and ambitions, of the American Negro, in classical musical form" (p. 148).

During his homeward voyage the ex-coloured man engages in conversation with a successful black doctor, who optimistically predicts progress for their race through moral suasion:

> The Negro is progressing, and that disproves all the arguments in the world that he is incapable of progress. I was born in slavery, and at emancipation was set adrift, a ragged, penniless bit of humanity. I have seen the negro in every grade, and I know what I am talking about. . . . If there is a principle of right in the world, which finally prevails, and I believe that there is; if there is a merciful but justice-loving God in heaven, and I believe that there is, we shall win; for we have right on our side, while those who oppose us can defend themselves by nothing in the moral law, nor even anything in the enlightened thought of the present age. (pp. 151-52)

This optimism is echoed by a retired Union soldier who debates a Texan on the alleged inferiority of blacks while both sit within earshot of the narrator on a train headed toward Georgia. Although he accords some respect to the Southerner because this stubborn disputant sticks to his principles, he also listens carefully while the old soldier defuses the

Texan's strongest arguments: "We are simply having our turn at the game, and we were a long time getting to it. After all, racial supremacy is merely a matter of dates in history. . . . If the Anglo-Saxon is the source of everything good and great in the human race from the beginning, why wasn't the German forest the birthplace of civilization, rather than the valley of the Nile?" (pp. 162-63).

This speech offers the narrator an occasion for explaining the rationale of many dark-skinned blacks in marrying lighter members of their race. Rather than a "tacit admission of coloured people among themselves of their own inferiority judged by the colour line" (p. 154), this process of "toning up" skin color is activated by economic necessity. He notes that the desired goal is to produce children with lighter skins than the darker parent to enhance the children's chances of finding jobs, and he cites newspaper advertisements seeking "light coloured men" to support his point.

In his description of a Nashville camp-meeting, the narrator shows that he himself harbors no prejudice against darker blacks. The lively sermon of John Brown, a jet-black minister, gives him an emotional charge as he listens to the Southern preacher employ a call-and-response technique to arouse those in attendance. With the intuition of a theatrical manager, Brown leads his seated listeners on a "heavenly march" that has them stamping their feet in unison. This synergistic exhortation brings about a transformation in the ex-coloured man: "The torrent of the preacher's words, moving with the rhythm and glaring with the eloquence of primitive poetry, swept me along, and I, too, felt like joining in the shouts of Amen! Hallelujah!" (p. 177).

Equally dynamic is Singing Johnson, a one-eyed choir leader who improvises head lyrics to accompany his listeners' unified chorus. The nar-

rator finds Johnson's rendition of "Go Down, Moses" as stirring as a trumpet call and identifies the hymn as the strongest theme in the world's musical literature. Sitting with tears rolling down his eyes as he feels his body sway in rhythm to Johnson's voice, he informs the reader that "any musical person who has never heard a Negro congregation under the spell of religious fervour sing these old songs has missed one of the most thrilling emotions which the human heart may experience" (p. 181). Like the narrator in Jean Toomer's Cane, the ex-coloured man laments that many blacks are ashamed of these primitive songs; he recognizes, however, that such feelings of resentment are directly attributable to the blacks being "still too close to the conditions under which the songs were produced" (p. 182).

When he moves on to Macon, Georgia, he witnesses an incident that causes him to feel ashamed of his race and serves as the crucial turning point of the novel. The sight of a black man's being burned alive at the stake by a group of Southern whites on horseback forces him to acknowledge the burdens of being black--burdens that he is still unwilling to accept fully because of his marginal status:

> It was over before I realized that time had elapsed. Before I could make myself believe that what I saw was really happening, I was looking at a scorched post, a smouldering fire, blackened bones, charred fragments sifting down through coils of chain; and the smell of burnt flesh--human flesh--was in my nostrils. I walked a short distance away and sat down in order to clear my dazed mind. A great wave of humiliation and shame swept over me. Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with; and shame for my country, that it, the great example of democracy to the world, should be the only civilized, if not the only state on earth, where a human being should be burned alive. (pp. 187-88)

Many of those contemporary readers who seize upon the above passage as evidence of the narrator's being an inappropriate spokesman for his author's attitudes toward race either overlook or ignore the double edge of his shame. The ex-coloured man prefaces his account of the lynching by asking his readers if they have ever seen human beings changed into savage beasts; after the description of the harrowing incident, he discounts the notion that the South should be left alone to deal with its racial problems.

The image of the burned black man encourages the narrator to attempt a racial neutrality so that he can avoid further acknowledgments of his powerlessness in a country where such atrocities can occur:

> I argued that to forsake one's race to better one's condition was no less worthy an action than to forsake one's country for the same purpose. I finally made up my mind that I would neigher disclaim the black race nor claim the white race; but that I would change my name, raise a moustache, and let the world take me for what it would; that it was not necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead. All the while I understood that it was not discouragement or fear or search for a larger field of action and opportunity that was driving me out of the Negro race. I knew that it was shame, unbearable shame. Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals. For certainly the law would restrain and punish the malicious burning alive of animals. (pp. 190-91)

The passage emphasizes both the narrator's sensitivity and naivete. In finding fault with the Georgia blacks for not bringing the white lynchmen to trial, he expresses the viewpoint of a sojourner in the South whose comments on the racial situation there are conclusions he reaches from research inspired more by curiosity than anything else. Frightened by what he has seen, he chooses to hide his racial identity as he plans a return trip to New York.

Once again on the East Coast, the ex-coloured man makes an important decision in relation to his marginality, one that looks back to his father's having placed the gold piece around his neck when he was a child: "I had made up my mind that since I was not going to be a Negro, I would avail myself of every possible opportunity to make a white man's success; and that, if it can be summed up in any one would, means 'money'" (p. 193). This decision, of course, is also consonant with the advice of the white benefactor who took him as a companion to Europe. A flow of wealth from the gambling table and the real-estate market allows him to live comfortably and to suppress regrets at having contracted the "money fever." Also suppressed are his temptations to identify himself as a black man after receiving applause for his ragtime performances to refute assertions that blackness is synonymous with inferiority.

When he meets an attractive young white woman at a social gathering, he faces another major decision, one that subjects him to extensive mental turmoil. Although she seems the "most dazzling white thing [he] had ever seen" (p. 198), he is attracted to her voice, which emits tones of "passionate color" from a fragile body. For a time he keeps us his racial disguise, even when he meets his old classmate Shiny, now a college professor, and introduces him to his sweetheart. Realizing that he has fallen in love with her, he undergoes the "hardest struggle" of his life in addmitting his racial background and then asking for her hand in marriage. Her shocked reaction to this admission causes him to imagine himself "growing black and thick-featured and crimp-haired" (p. 204) in front of her. When she defers an answer by traveling to New Hampshire for a summer vacation, he experiences true torment. Notwithstanding the shock of the lynching scene, he deems his complete honesty in his proposal of marriage the "only time in [his] life that [he] ever felt abso-

lute regret at being coloured, that [he] cursed the drops of African blood in [his] veins and wished that [he] were really white" (p. 205).

When she ultimately accepts his proposal, however, he becomes the happiest man in the world. She bears him two children, the birth of the second causing her to forfeit her life. Withdrawing from society, the ex-coloured man takes into account the hardships that his children would face should their racial identity ever be discovered. Consequently, he decides to continue passing for white while acknowledging misgivings about abandoning his goal of exemplary racial achievement.

Because Johnson assigns the protagonist the dual roles of naive actor and seemingly authoritative commentator on important racial issues, many readers face interpretive challenges throughout the narrative. At many points the titular character's attitudes toward a single event seem not only multiple but contradictory. Despite Johnson's insistence that he did not set out to compose The Autobiography as a novel, the work often appears a roman a these too heavily freighted with information that detracts from the narrator's vivid impressions of the people and events he sees during his journeys. Because of the aims that Johnson wanted to achieve the central character had to be invested with both heroic and non-heroic traits; because he realized that it would be easier to change moral attitudes toward events than to change the events themselves, Johnson's narrative had to incorporate numerous commentaries (some of which seem extraneous and dated) from the titular character on the various situations in which the ex-coloured man finds himself entangled. Johnson's strategy depended on his depiction of the protagonist as a mulatto who experiences a continuing education in racial double-consciousness.

If for many contemporary readers Johnson's strategy is not completely successful, the fault lies not in the extent of his effort. Bur-

dened with the obligation of addressing his narrator's insights to white readers who might modify their attitudes toward blacks, Johnson of necessity had to present a character who would provide thim with glimpses of blackness at the same time that he exemplifies his being a product of white conditioning.

Despite several flaws in the novel, we can praise Johnson as an early literary artist. The complexities in characterization and structure in The Autobiography attempt to outline what was indeed a series of complicated issues in both 1912 and 1927. If our ultimate response to the ex-coloured man is ambivalent--as it should be--we acknowledge the literary virtues of the risks that Johnson took in offering us a memorable protagonist who repeatedly faces crises of racial identity.

Notes

[1] My source is James Weldon Johnson, The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, introd. Arna Bontemps (1912; New York: Hill and Wang, 1960). Subsequent references are indicated parenthetically in the text. Johnson reissued the novel in 1927, during the height of the Harlem Renaissance. Because numerous readers detected elements of authenticity within the novel, Johnson felt compelled to write his true autobiography, Along This Way (1933; New York: Viking, 1965). In ATW Johnson explains that he rejected a suggestion from his brother Rosamond to entitle the novel The Chameleon, and in a letter to Carl Van Doren, dated 28 December 1922, Johnson classifies The Autobiography as a "human document" rather than a novel. This letter is cited in David Levy, James Weldon Johnson: Black Leader, Black Voice (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 132, as is information on Johnson's use of his former law partner, J. Douglas Wetmore, as a partial model for the ex-coloured man. Levy also identifies the establishments serving as models for the gambling house and the club mentioned in the novel.

[2] The Negro Novel in America (1958; New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1965), p. 46.

[3] Perhaps the best generic classification for the work is the Menippean satire, which "uses plot freely and loosely to present a view of the world in terms of sharply controlled intellectual patterns. In its shortest forms, Menippean satire is a dialogue or a colloquy, with its interest in the conflict of ideas. In longer works, the Menippean satirist piles up vast accumulations of facts and presents this erudition through someintellectual organizing principle." See C. Hugh Holman, ed., A Handbook to Literature, 4th ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1980), p. 263.

[4] "Introduction" to The Autobiography, pp. xi-xii.

[5] See Robert E. Fleming, "Irony as a Key to Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man," American Literature, 43 (March 1971), 83-96, Marvin P. Garrett, "Early Recollections and Structural Irony in The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man," Critique, 13 (December 1971), 5-14, Roger Rosenblatt, Black Fiction (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 173-84, and Joseph T. Skerrett, "Irony and Symbolic Action in James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man," Arizona Quarterly, 32 (1976), 540-58. In "Audience and Irony in Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man," CLA Journal, 18 (December 1974), 178-210, Stephen M. Ross offers the most tenable of such approches in observing that Johnson "attacks a hypothetical white audience; the narrator is

unreliable not because he is obtuse or hypocritical, but because Johnson wants us to see him as betrayed by a white, upper-class value system he cannot escape. . . . Johnson elicits the otherwise unwilling sympathy of his white reader by creating his protagonist's story out of conventional fictional situations; then, through careful irony, he demonstrates that the psychological impulses and moral values underlying those conventions are themselves the cause of the hero's tragedy. He encourages the reader to wish for the narrator's success in conventional terms, though the narrator is engaged in the unconventional endeavor of successfully 'passing' and committing miscegenation. And when the wished-for success is undercut by irony, the reader is left in the same ambiguous position as the narrator, not knowing what 'success' really means in a world so divided between Black and White; the reader is thus forced to share the genuinely tragic 'unsatisfaction' of the narrator" (199-200). In "The Endless Journey of an Ex-Coloured Man," Phylon, 32 (Winter 1971), 365-73, Eugenia Collier finds parallels between the protagonist's journey from the South to the North and the self-initiated changes in his racial status, and Ladell Payne places The Autobiography in a tradition of Southern writing in Black Novelists and the Southern Literary Tradition (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1981), pp. 26-37. Both Robert E. Fleming and Houston A. Baker Jr. analyze the influence of Johnson's work on other Afro-American novels in, respectively, "Contemporary Themes in Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man," Black American Literature Forum, 4 (December 1970), 12-24 and "A Forgotten Prototype: The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man and Invisible Man," Virginia Quarterly Review, 49 (Summer 1973), 433-49. Addison Gayle Jr. condemns the narrator but praises Johnson in his discussion of the novel: "No character in fiction, no artist throughout history has been so willing to surrender the richness of his racial culture as Johnson's protagonist. . . . His willingness to surrender his cultural artifacts is symbolic, in a larger sense, of the willingness to surrender racial identity--an act he performs at the end of the novel--along with the most important treasure of any people--their cultural and historical artifacts. . . . [The importance of the book lies in Johnson's attempt to] synthesize the thought of the previous period on such topics as the plight of the mulatto, the representation of the black middle class, and, for the first time in black fiction, the function of the black artist in the American society." See Gayle, The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 111-14.

[6] Pp. 48-49.

[7] Levy, p. 131.

[8] Levy, p. 134.

[9] For a well-documented discussion of problems related to audience faced by Johnson and other Harlem Renaissance writers, see Charles Scruggs, "'All Dressed Up But No Place to Go,': The Black Writer and His Audience During the Harlem Renaissance," American Literature, 48 (January 1977), 543-63.

[10] Ross, p. 209.

[11] Ross, p. 210.

[12] See Levy, p. 129.

CHAPTER IV

Rhetoric versus Eloquence in Wright's "Long Black Song"

In an important discussion of thematic ambiguity in novels and short stories, Robert B. Heilman defines "two-tone fiction" as prose "in whose impact we sense some inconsistency or discrepancy or variation or departure from the expectation established by the apparently controlling devices employed by the writer." Heilman points out that such multivalence may arise because an author "has, so to speak, different 'intentions' in control at different times, or because he is overtaken, half aware, by a subtle change in attitude. It may arise because he has unstable responses to a character or situation, or, at a deeper level, has emotional contradictions that express themselves in fictional elements of not wholly congruous impact."[1] For numerous Afro-American prose writers this apparent lack of control over characterizations, actions, or themes is often directly attributable to an uncertainly regarding the proper audience to be edified by an engaging narrative. As black novelist James Weldon Johnson noted in 1928,

> . . . the Aframerican author faces a special problem which the plain American author knows nothing about--the problem of the double audience; it is more than a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with different and often opposite points of view. His audience is always both white America and Black America. The moment a Negro writer takes up his pen or sits down to his typewriter, he is immediately called upon to solve--consciously or unconsciously--this problem of the double audience. To whom

> shall he address himself, to his own black group or to white America? Many a Negro writer has fallen down, as it were, between these two stools.[2]

For Richard Wright, a prolific black author who bears the distinction of being the father of the contemporary Afro-American novel but who also once acknowledged that he wrote not "for black people, but for whites,"[3] the burden of attempting to shape his fictions to appeal to both black and white readers manifests itself in tensions within his works--tensions so strong that they frequently lead to interpretive obfuscation. Eastablishing a roadblock to an elucidation of his thematic concerns is our recognition that in "most of his work, Wright is caught on double duty: he tries to find his way as artist through his was as militant spokesman."[4] We see that the conflict between creative artistry and militant ideology emerges as a disjunction between technique and theme, between tone and intention--a dualism of purpose evidencing his uncertainty about his intended readership.

This confusion is apparent in "How Bigger Was Born," a well-known essay appended to Native Son, in which he comments on the failure of Uncle Tom's Children to have elicited the desired responses he had anticipated: "I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it, that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears."[5] In offering a blueprint for a new work of fiction that would deny its readers a healthful catharsis, Wright discusses his failure to have evoked a "hardness" from readers of his earlier effort. Yet, left unclarified is the motivation that would have caused whites to respond to injustices against blacks with any "positive" emotion in contrast to pity.

Moreover, in the essay Wright concedes that his technique for composing Native Son drew upon some white models for Bigger Thomas and upon various portraitures of downtrodden whites by non-black authors:

> I met white authors who talked of their responses, who told me how whites reacted to this lurid American scene. And as they talked, I'd translate what they said in terms of Bigger's life. But what was more important, still, I read their novels. Here, for the first time, I found ways and techniques of gauging meaningfully the effects of American civilization upon the personalities of people. I took these techniques, these ways of seeing and feeling, and twisted them, bent them, adapted them, until they became my ways of apprehending the locked-in life of the Black Belt areas. This association with white writers was the life preserver of my hope to depict Negro life in fiction, for my race possessed no fictional works dealing with such problems, had no background in such sharp and critical testing of experience, no novels that went with a deep and fearless will down to the dark roots of life.[6]

Within this statement of Wright's source of inspiration, we find evidence of his reliance on "white techniques" to articulate "black themes." We also discover a source of recurrent cloudiness in his works, our sense that he was uncomfortable with a Black Aesthetic prescription demanding that "to evaluate the life and culture of black people, it is necessary that one live the black experience in a world where substance is more important than form; where the social takes precedence over the aesthetic; where each act, gesture, and movement is political; and where continual rebellion separates the insane from the sane, the robot from the revolutionary."[7]

Instead, Wright recognized that the development of an effective fictive technique was a touchstone of his emergence as a writer, a measurement of his literary craftsmanship, and--just as important--a vehicle for elevating his works above those of other black writers. Margaret Walker Alexander, noted black novelist and longtime friend of Wright, reminds

us that "all the forces influencing [him] were forces of the white world: he seems to have been shaped very little by black people. As a matter of fact, black people were never his ideals. He champions the cause of the black man, but he never idealized or glorified him. . . . Every positive force he recognized in his life stemmed from white people."[8] In addition, Robert Stepto provides a key insight into the multivalence that pervades many of Wright's fictions in noting that "Wright's entanglement in the web of double-consciousness . . . manifests itself in an ambivalent attitude towrad his race and its rituals."[9]

Wright's own statements of his indebtedness to white authors, as well as the commentaries of Alexander and Stepto, bear relevance to the interpretive challenge of "Long Black Song" (1938), the third of five novellas tht make up UTC.[10] In American Hunger Wright informs us that the story was composed to answer a burning question--"What quality of will must a black man have to live with dignity in a country that denied his humanity?"--but that the narrative "did not catch the quality of the experience [he] was looking for."[11] In simplest terms the tale relates the violent consequences of a Southern black farmer's cuckoldry, including his confrontation with carloads of whites who burn down his cabin with him inside it. Before he faces his wife's correspondent, a white collegian earning money during the summer by selling gramophones, Silas condemns this character's actions in terms that reverberate Wright's aesthetic principles for hardness:

> "The white folks ain never gimme a chance! They ain never give no black man a chance! There ain nothing in your whole life yuh kin keep from em! They take yo land! They take your freedom! They take yo women! N then they take yo life!" He turned to [Sarah] screaming. "N then Ah gits stabbed in the back by mah own blood! When mah eyes is on the white folks to keep em from killing me, mah own blood trips me up!" He knelt

> in the dust again and sobbed; after a bit he looked to the sky, his face wet with tears. "Ahm gonna be hard like they is. So hep me, Gawd, Ahm gonna be hard! When they come fer me Ahm gonna be here! N when they get me outta here theys gonna know Ahm gone! Ef Gawd lets me live Ahm gonna make em feel it." (p. 125)[12]

We face a difficulty, however, in determining the extent to which Wright intended for us to endorse Silas' statement. Although Keneth Kinnamon has argued that Silas' "outrage is the cumulative outrage of a life of deprivations" and that "in giving utterance to his sense of indignity, he is the collective voice of his people,"[13] we also see that "events in the story do not illustrate all aspects of Silas' assertion."[14] Moreover, Donald B. Gibson observes that "Wright the social and political man and Wright the person, the discrete, particular human individual, were often not one and the same" and that in "LBS" the "tension between Wright the public author, the ideologue, the writer of social protest, and Wright the private author, the purveyor of privately held beliefs, ideas, and symbols comes to the fore in a clearer, more explicitly bifurcated way than anywhere else."[15]

Much of this difficulty is traceable to Wright's presentation of Silas and Sarah as competitors for centrality in the story, and scholarly commentary reflects disagreement over Silas' status as its true protagonist.[16] In addition to the statement in American Hunger, we have Wright's variant explanation of the influences of popular writers of the 1920's as inspirations for a novella designed to give Sarah prominence:

> Practically all of us, young writers, were influenced by Ernest Hemingway. We liked the simple, direct way in which he wrote, but a great many of us wanted to write about social problems. The question came up: how could we write about social problems and use a simple style? Hemingway's style is so concentrated on naturalistic detail that there is no room for social comment.

> One boy said that one way was to dig deeper into the character and try to get something that will live. I decided to try it. I took a very simple Negro woman living in the Northern hills of Mississippi and tried to construct a story about her. In order to make an implied social comment about her, I tried to conceive of a simple peasant woman, whose outlook upon life was influenced by natural things, and to contrast her with a white salesman selling phonographs and records.[17]

Within the above statement we find evidence of Wright's multiple intentions in shaping "LBS" to reflect naturalism, "borrowed" narrative technique, and focused social commentary. What seems clear is that at some point in the development of the narrative, he chose to enlarge the fictional tapestry depicting Sarah's simplicity to include Silas' violent response to her sexual indiscretion. Aware that he could exploit Silas' strong assertions to condemn whites in general for a series of unforgiveable, cumulative transgressions against blacks, Wright decided to make the showdown between the farmer and the salesman loom larger than a "private affair." Silas would no longer remain "odd man out" in a fiction highlighting Sarah's naivete and the superior knowledge of the collegian. In short, the "social problem" would be broadened.

The subsequent shift in interest from Sarah to Silas, however, presents an interpretive challenge to readers who find that Wright fails to subordinate her characterization to have Silas stand out as an appropriate spokesman for his author's racial dynamics. When Gayle recalls depictions of domineering black female figures in Wright's semi-autobiographical Black Boy, he notes that in "LBS" subordination is weakened and narrative focus distorted because the "line between antagonist and protagonist is blurred, and the reason may be that [Wright] is incapable of distancing himself emotionally from perceptions that continue to plague him concerning the relationship between black man and black women. Sarah finds her-

self joined in a conspiracy to bring about the death and destruction of her husband Silas."[18] Thus, we locate an appropriate starting point for an analysis of the novella in our evaluation of Sarah's unwitting contribution to her husband's undoing.

By beginning the narrative with a description of Sarah's reveries about Tom--a "hidden" yet important character in the story--Wright first focuses our attention on her susceptibility to the white youth's sexual advances. The opening paragraphs reveal her struggles to overcome loneliness as she thinks about a bit of red calico that Silas has promised to bring back from his almost week-long absence on a cotton-selling trip. While trying to keep her infant daughter Ruth from crying, she fuses thoughts about the calico with images of red sunsets, green fields, and "white bright days" and then thinks about Tom, from whom she had escaped on a Lover's Lane before she married Silas. The proliferation of color imagery, which shows Wright's indebtedness to Stephen Crane,[19] accretes as Sarah compares memories of Tom with the reality of her sexual dissatisfaction with Silas: "The happiness of those days and nights, of those green cornfields and grey skies had started to go form her when Tom had gone to war. His leaving had left an empty black hole in her heart, a black hole that Silas had come in and filled. But not quite. Silas had not quite filled that hole. No; days and nights were not as they were before" (p. 106). Caught up in recollections of the "deep desire of dark black nights" (p. 106), she sees the approach of a black car and the emergence of a white man carrying a black package not as symbols presaging violence and death, but as additional images easily identified with Tom and with the possibility of sexual fulfillment.

The collegian's sales pitch--to encourage Sarah to purchase a combination clock and phongraph--is ineffective because she and Silas have no

need for modern contraptions to signal the beginnings of new days. In her rejection of the white man's offer, she continues to concentrate on the sexual evocations of darkness as th two of them converse past sunset. Sarah notices that the "dark sky had swalloped up the earth" and that "more stars were hanging, clustered, burning" (p. 110). She also watches the student grind the handle of the gramophone and experiences a moment of transport as she listens to the lyrics of "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder," a popular black spiritual. Even though she attempts to disregard his staring at her breasts because she considers him a "lil boy," she associates his presence with Tom's image when she laeads him to a well for a drink of water. In placing the two characters at the well, Wright is, of course, preparing us for their sexual encounter; the scene is designed to suggest a parallel with the New Testament account of the woman from Samaria, who speaks with Jesus about the man with whom she lives in adultery (John 4:5-19). When the salesman touches Sarah's breast, she tries unsuccessfully to break away but finds herself not only passive but receptive to his physicality. Running away from him into the bedroom that she shares with Silas, she succumbs to colorful visions of contentment transforming her visitor into a substitute for her first lover. Failing to resist the white man's aggressiveness, she yields to him as Ruth beats on a broken eight-day clock to produce the sound bangbangbang.

In this first section of the novella, we notice that Wright draws multiple evocations out of individual symbols and scenes. Bang, for example, represents not only the sound of Ruth's beating an old clock but a suggestive allusion to the sexual encounter between Sarah and the salesman, impending violence between Silas and the rednecks, the sounds of gunfire in an overseas war in which Tom is fighting, and a dream-association of what sex would have been like with Silas' black rival. Moreover, the

salesman's white skin represents on one level Sarah's initial fears about violating a taboo against interracial sexual relations in the South but on another level points to her beautiful vision of brights days of sexual happiness with Tom. Ultimately, we find that Wright's decision to introduce two-way symbols into this section accentuates bitonalities that pervade the entire narrative.

With the arrival of Silas in the second section, the interpretive difficulties of the story become more apparent. His discovery of both the gramophone and the salesman's straw hat prepare us for one of the central scenes of conflict in the narrative, as does his awareness of Sarah's dissimulations about the white man's having been in their bedroom. Yet, the story leaves unclarified the collegian's reasons for opting to collect a balance of payment on the gramophone from Silas and, equally inexplicable, Sarah's willigness to have the white man leave the clock and return the next day to face her husband. Does Wright want us to assume that the salesman, a future science major in college, is stupid, or are we to see him as guilty of one of the most heinous examples of racial and sexual exploitation in contemporary literature? And what are we to make of Sarah? Is she a sexually starved adulteress insensitive to Silas' feelings--and unmindful of their shared wedding vows--or an overaged Southern naif who displays the same bovine sexuality that characterizes Faulkner's Lena Grove and Eula Varner?

These problems are compounded when we analyze Silas' reaction upon discovering a moist handkerchief providing olfactory evidence of Sarah's infidelity. Having sold his cotton, purchased additional acreage, and considered the prospect of hiring a helper for farm work, he returns home with the calico and expects to find his wife content. When he verifies his cuckoldry, however, he lashes out against white men in general--not just

the salesman--for making his dreams of economic self-sufficiency illusions:

> "It don make no difference." He looked out over the filled fields. "Fer ten years Ah slaved mah life out t git mah farm free . . ." His voice broke off. His lips moved as though a thousand words were spilling silently out of his mouth, as though he did not have breath enough to give them sound. He looked to the sky, and then back to the dust. "Now, it's all gone. Gone . . . Ef Ah run erway, Ah ain got nothing. Ef Ah stay n fight, Ah ain got nothin. It don make no difference which way Ah go. Gawd! Gawd! Ah wish all them white folks wuz dead! Dead, Ah tell yuh! Ah wish Gawd would kill em all!"

Although Silas' speech is a reaction to injustice, we find a difficulty in determining how much of his anger is properly targeted. In deciding to await the return of the collegian, he contemplates a course of action that looks ahead not only to the death of his wife's bedmate but to his own demise. Nevertheless, as Brignano points out, even though Wright "maintains the vision of a domineering and cruel white world, the justification for Silas' murder of the salesman is hardly convincing."[20] Additionally, we have Sarah's revelatory (yet puzzling) comment that "if it [had been] anybody but a white man, it would be different" (p. 122).

Left uncertain, then, is the degree of accuracy that Wright wanted to accord Silas' interpretation of the events that took place within the farmer's cabin. Although Silas's deadly confrontation with the salesman points to Wright's interest in depicting hostitlities between Southern blacks and whites, numous readers have judged Silas' frustration and anger personal rathern than specifically racial problems. Edwin Burgum, for example, suggests that "although his plot is on the surface sheer race conflict, the deeper implications transcend race, apply equally to whites, and only become the clearer though their more intense representation in Negro material. If we are to grant a legitimacy to Burgum's interpretation,

we must reconsider Silas' broad indictment of the Anglo-Saxon race as an inaccurante, after-the-fact response to events that the character did not himself witness.

"LBS" presents us with seemingly mutually exclusive interpretive options because Wright emphasizes more than one significant conflict within the narrative. In addition to the struggle between Sarah and the salesman, we get accounts of Silas' confrontation with his wife and the subsequent description of his standing up to the rubes who come to lynch him and to burn him out. Within each of these conflicts we find ambiguities that becloud Wright's elucidation of his meaning.

In the depiction of the salesman's encounter with Sarah, we detect an awkwardness related to an uncertainty surrounding her age and sexual attractiveness. When the student first approaches her, he addresses her as "Aunty," a frequent eponym in Southern fiction that identifies a woman character--either black or white--as being safely beyond menopause. And Sarah, in turn, informs us that the youthful collegian looks like a little child. What, then, are we to make of Wright's overcoming this apparent contrast in ages to have the two characters engage in sexual intercourse, especially since we see that the student reduces ten dollars from the price of the gramophone in payment for Sarah's sexual favors? If we concentrate on Wright's statement concerning Sarah's lack of sophistication and "naturalness" as the germ of the story, it becomes clear that he wanted her to seem much older and less educated than the white character. Yet, the collegian's intimacy with her and Silas' subsequent response to their tryst pale these contrasts into insignificance. Here Wright burdens Sarah with inconsistent roles of siren and Earth Mother.[22] She must appear old enough to accentuate the collegian's superior intelligence

but young enough to arouse his sexual desire and Silas' fatal anger. Moreover, if we accept as accurate her statement about the collegian's innocence, we are forced to conclude that Wright fails to offer us through the white character a strong enough counterpoint to Sarah's own simplicity. After all, the salesman's eagerness to bed her appears more a response to an uncontrollable biological urgency than a pre-calculated strategy for racial malevolence.

Just as ambiguous is Wright's description of the temporal setting in the first section of the novella. When the salesman drives up in his car, Sarah informs us that the vehicle is black, information that would be credible if there had been enough light for her to see the car clearly. Yet, after only five minutes of conversation, both characters indicate that they are overshadowed by the darkness of sunset. When she hands him a gourd at the well, he responds, "Gee, it's dark" (p. 111), one of several lines of suggestive symbolism in the segment, and here Wright intends for us to attach erotic innuendo to the salesman's pulling a long, dark rope through the well's opening. But in this scene symbolism works against setting. In placing the two characters near the well to frame their subsequent miscegenation, Wright loses sight of a proper temporal sequence of narrative events. In this section the action proceeds at a confusing "double time" that, just as much as the telltale handkerchief, points to Wright's interest in having his readers dectect his familiarity with Shakespeare's Othello.

In addition, the conflict between Silas and Sarah raises problems signaling an absence of authority within the narrative. After relying on a stream-of-eloquence technique to outline Sarah, Wright offers us too little information about Silas' relationship with his wife. Instead, the

farmer stands out as an eccentric study in agrarian acquisitiveness, and this image of Wright's would-be raisonneur introduces an extraneous context within the story, one not directly related to race. Roger Rosenblatt has argued that Sarah's allowing herself to be seduced "is not a sign of her promiscuity or boredom, but simply an effort at human feeling" and that "when Silas discovers his wife's treachery, his outcry is self-condemning."[23] Absent evidence to the contrary, we see her as a neglected wife when Silas drives up in his wagon, and Michel Fabre urges us to conclude that Silas travels to another town and leaves her alone for too long "in order to get rich and equal the whites, thus partially justifying her infidelity."[24]

If Silas' denunciations of whites seem extreme, so does his mistreatment of Sarah. In misidentifying her as his "blood," he reveals his confusion of property and conjugal rights. He takes out a horsewhip to punish her and directs her to enter a barn to receive her lashings. Thus, when he later blasts out against white men, many readers will sense that his unsupportable reaction to her adultery is no different from the response he would have given upon learning that some of his valuable farm land had been despoiled.

That Wright was uncertain about what he wanted to do with Silas is illustrated in his having the character provide Sarah with information about Tom, his previous competitor for her affection, only moments before discovering the gramophone. He charges her with lying to him about Ruth's paternity in an accusation that seems as superfluous as it is mistaken, especially in light of his long-winded condemnation of whites. If Wright meant for Silas to represent the collective frustrations of Mississippi blacks, then he erred in failing to offer us a larger frame of reference through which to evaluate his character's strong sense of group identity.

Many readers have noted, for instance, that "LBS" is the only story in UTC that denies us an image of black community. Although we find references to Aunt Peel (presumably Tom's mother), to whose house Silas directs Sarah as he prepares to fight with the rubes, neither this character nor any other black besides the two principal figures appears in the tale. The effect of this absence is to reduce the impact of Sarah's adultery to domestic disharmony and to flatten the soapbox on which Silas stands to articulate a racially based "social message" for his creator.

Yet, perhaps the most disturbing element in "LBS" is Wright's unsuccessful attempt to heighten Silas' status near the conclusion of the story. Several critics have deemed Silas a tragic figure because of his efforts to maintain his dignity before the whites kill him, but Sarah's severe criticism of all fighting between men invalidates his candidacy for grandeur. Even though he dies in a burning house in a scene designed to emphasize the punishment a Southern black can expect for killing a white man, Sarah offers a sweeping condemnation of man-to-man conflict, a condemnation that mitigates any heroism we might otherwise be inclined to attach to his death:

> White men killed the black and black men killed the white. White men killed the black men because they could, and the black men killed the white men to keep from being killed. And killing was blood. . . . Yes, killing of white men by black men and killing of black men by white men went on in spite of the hope of bright white days and the desire of dark black nights and the long gladness of green cornfields in summer and the deep dream of sleepy grey skies in winter. And when killing started, it went on, like a river flowing. Oh, she felt sorry for Silas! . . . He was following that long river of blood. (pp. 120, 126)

Significantly, whereas Silas considers his fighting the whites an inevitable consequence of the salesman's having bedded his wife, Sarah's thoughts reflect a Baldwinesque outrage against all interracial violence. For Sarah, sexual desire and violence are separable elements of human existence, aspects of life bearing no relevance to race. But how much authority does Wright want us to grant to her viewpoint?

Those readers who identify Silas as the protagonist and accord him a dignity in death play down Wright's description of the ending of the story from Sarah's ange of vision. Although Silas vows to make the white men feel his strength when they come to ferret him out, we are denied a vivid account of the character's living up to his word. We are told that he grapples in the dust with the white men and that he dies hopelessly outnumbered. Yet, we do not see him giving up his last breath in a gallant effort to maintain his integrity, and the narrative offers no image of his fighting the whites with their own weapons. Instead, Wright shapes the ending to show us that Silas goes down not as a casualty of racial warfare, but, at best, as a noble suicide. In placing Sarah on a hill overlooking her smouldering cabin, Wright gives us a fictional equivalent to a "prospect scene" in eighteenth-century English poetry. Elevated above the violence that entangles her husband, she offers us a final, pitiful lament over the forces that cause blacks and whites to fight one another. And her elevation about Silas indicates that she has a stronger claim to characterizational prominence in a fiction that repeatedly polarizes masculine and feminine perspectives.

Although neither Silas nor Sarah stands out as an adequate center of intelligence within the narrative, Wright's bracketing Silas' speeches between Sarah's reveries and offering her a final commentary on the climax suggest that he chose to give priority to her depiction in his ef-

forts to improve his craftsmanship. Doubtless, this attempt was calculated to impress white readers, whom Wright hoped would recognize the influence of Stein, Hemingway, Crane, Faulkner, and Shakespeare within the work.[25] Whereas white readers are likely to identify Sarah as the true protagonist, black readers are more likely to endorse Silas' strong rhetoric.

Once we acknowledge that Wright's multiple intentions overlap to produce extraneous contexts in the story, we see that "LBS" seems to have as many isolable themes as Hardy's Jude the Obscure. The eloquence, lyricism, and prolific imagery that dominate the first section of the story clash with the stridency of outsized speeches later in the tale. One of the most powerful images in the narrative--the burning cabin--functions as both an objective correlative for violance and a Freudian signpost for erotoleptic seizures. And whereas on one level the story's title refers to a succession of discriminatory acts against blacks, on another level it underlines Sarah's sexual loneliness. In offering us a fiction that presents her as both a victim and a villainess, describes Silas as a cuckold and a chauvinist, and links blackness with both death and sensualaity, Wright has given us a complex double narrative--like Melville's "Billy Budd"--in which "every interpretive argument is demonstrable,"[26] a narrative that easily lends itself to deconstructionist analysis and exhibits problematic disharmonies between technique and theme.

Notes

[1] "Two-Tone Fiction: Nineteenth-Century Types and Eighteenth-Century Problems," in The Theory of the Novel: New Essays, ed. John Halperin (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 305, 306. Also relevant is Allen Friedman's "The Modern Multivalent Novel: Form and Function," in the same volume, 121-40. Friedman argues that "univalence in fiction is essentially what we mean when we speak of authorial intrusiveness, or any other device by which a single, unambivalent narrative stance dominates, and thus embodies the values of the book. Narrative ambivalence occurs when several perspectives merge, creating moral confusion" (122-23).

[2] "The Dilemma of the Negro Author," American Mercury, 15 (December 1928), 477.

[3] Cited in Addison Gayle Jr.'s "Introduction" to The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976),

[4] Dan McCall, The Example of Richard Wright (New York: Harcourt, 1969), p. 9.

[5] Perennial classics ed. (1940; New York: Harper, 1966), p. xxvii.

[6] "How Bigger Was Born," p. xvi.

[7] Gayle, p. xii.

[8] "The Daemonic Genius of Richard Wright," New Letters, 38 (Winter 1971), 200.

[9] "I Thought I Knew These People,': Richard Wright and the Afro-American Literary Tradition," in Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art and Scholarship, ed. Michael S. Harper and Robert B. Stepto (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1979), pp. 196.

[10] Perennial classics ed. (1940; New York: Harper, 1965). Further references are indicated parenthetically in the text. Edward Margolies has deemed "Long Black Song" Wright's finest effort in fiction; see his The Art of Richard Wright (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1969), p. 66.

[11] Perennial classics ed. (New York: Harper, 1977), p. 89. American Hunger was published posthumously.

[12] Many readers have found that Silas' speech serves as a pivot for not only "LBS" but UTC as a whole. James E. Giles, for example, argues that the novella "serves as a transition story between the negaltive flight of the first two stories and the positive Marxist defiance of the last two" in "Richard Wright's Successful Failure: A New Look at Uncle Tom's Children," Phylon, 34 (September 1973), 262.

[13] The Emergence of Richard Wright: A Study in Literature of Society (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1972), p. 98.

[14] Russell Brignano, Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), p. 16.

[15] The Politics of Literary Expression: A Study of Major Black Writers (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood, 1981), pp. 24, 27.

[16] Approaches to the work from psycho-biographical, neo-Aristotelian, Marxist, and feminist perspectives indicate that the problem of characterizational prominence is indeed of crucial concern to a number of readers. David Bakish finds that "though Sarah is the focal point of the story, surrounded by music and the poetry of Wright's musical and soft-spoken language, the ending abruptly switches the focus to her husband" in Richard Wright (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973), p. 21. In "Trust and Mistrust: Women Characters in the Fiction of Richard Wright," Studies in the Twentieth Century, 10 (Fall 1972), 36-37, John Timmerman views Sarah as the villainess of the story--as a sexually dissatisfied, indolent inhabitant of a dream world, who allows herself to be caught up in fantasies while Silas struggles to maintain his sense of self. For Edwin Burgum the story gains its vitality from the fact that "its action is associated with an inner revolution in the character of [Silas], the protagonist"; Burgum's comments appear in The Art of Richard Wright's Short Stories; rpt. in Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Richard Macksey and Frank E. Moorer (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-hall, 1984), p. 202. In contrast, Sherley Anne Williams analyzes the story from a feminist perspective to identify Sarah as one of only two female protagonists in the Wright oeuvre and to observe that the character undergoes a maturation that marks her initiation into black adult / woman-hood; this admittedly "exaggerated" reading of the story, which also labels Wright a misogynist, appears in "Papa Dick and Sister-Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright," in American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism, ed. Fritz Fleischmann (Boston: Hall, 1982), p. 409. Margolies also sees the story unfold from Sarah's point of view and notes that "she becomes, at the end, a kind of deep mother earth character, registering her primal instincts and reactions to the violence and senselessness she sees all around her" (p. 66). Kinnamon links the shifting focus in characterizational centrality to ambiguity in the story when he posits that "Wright's choice of narrative perspective has important consequences. The action is filtered though Sarah's rather diffuse sensibility, and the

effect on the reader is a reduced sense of immediacy and intensity; he does not suffer with Silas as he does with Big Boy and Mann" (p. 95). For Sylvia H. Keady, Wright's black women are subjected to as much racial prejudice as his black male figures; see her "Richard Wright's Women Characters and Inequality," Black American Literature Forum, 10 (1976), 124-28.

[17] Cited in Richard Wright Reader, ed. Ellen Wright and Michel Fabre (New York: Harper, 1978), p. 257. Wright admitted that even though he had been "far more disgruntled" with "LBS" than he had been with the first two stories in UTC, he was also "far more pleased" with the third fiction "since the redemption of the protagonist Silas, although a private affair, was the outcome of his determination to fight his oppressors with their own weapons" (p. 258).

[18] Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), p. 111.

[19] Alexander points out that Wright admired Maggie: A Girl of the Streets more so than any other of Crane's fictions. Many readers have found Crane's work ambiguous in its presentation of the titular character as a "blossom" elevated above the "mud puddle" of her environment. See Alexander, p. 25.

[20] Burgum, p. 202.

[21] Brignano, p. 17. See, in addition, P. Jay Delmar, "Charles W. Chesnutt's 'The Web of Circumstance' and Richard Wright's 'Long Black Song': The Tragedy of Property," Studies in Short Fiction, 17 (1980), 178-79.

[22] See George Kent's assessment of Sarah's characterization in "Richard Wright: Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture," CLA Journal, 12 (June 1969), 330: "Sarah, as a black person not emerged from nature, requires a creative energy to lift her from the category of stereotype which Wright was unable to give her. One has to see her as earth goddess, or as the stereotype of loose sexuality. Since Silas' violent war with whites and his obvious needs and heroic struggle claim the sympathy of the reader, the symbols that have given Sarah a tenuous stature as earth goddess, above the wars of black men and white men, crumble, and she appears as mindless stupidity and sensuality."

[23] Black Fiction (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974), p. 87.

[24] The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright, trans. Isabel Barzun (New York: Morrow, 1973), p. 159.

[25] Several readers have also found parallels between Wright's story and "Blood Burning Moon" in Jean Toomer's Cane. In each fiction a black man and a white man fight as a consequence of their sexual attraction to a black woman. In addition, Wright may also have been influenced by The

Chip Woman's Fortune (1923), by black dramatist Willis Richardson. In this play Silas, a middle-aged black husband and father, is "furloughed" from his job as a consequence of his inability to keep up payments on a Victrola. Richardson's work is anthologized in Black Drama in America: An Anthology, ed. Darwin T. Turner (Greenwich, Ct.: Fawcett, 1971), pp. 25-47.

[26] Paul Brodtkorb Jr., "The Definitive Billy Budd: 'But Aren't It All Sham?'" PMLA, 82 (December 1967), 612.

CHAPTER V

From Stereotype to Archetype: Blackness as Metaphor in Ellison's Invisible Man

In declaring the Negro "America's metaphor,"[1] Wright recognized that our country's treatment of its black citizens could serve as a gauge of their progress in overcoming an American dream manque. For Ralph Ellison, a former disciple of Wright, the concept of blackness in relation to metaphor becomes a starting point for fictional investigations of ways in which the struggles of blacks parallel the efforts of all other Americans to achieve a sense of individual integrity. Whereas numerous critics have identified Wright as the forerunner of militant black American writing, Ellison has argued that "as a writer, Richard Wright has outlined for himself a dual role: to discover and depict the meaning of Negro experience; and to reveal to both Negroes and whites those problems of a psychological and emotional nature which arise between them when they strive for mutual understanding."[2] In his assessment of Wright's autobiographical Black Boy, Ellison finds that his mentor achieves an artistic triumph in the latter's "development of individuality."[3] Yet, Wright was not the only writer to exert a powerful influence on Ellison. In voicing a strong objection to the way that the older writer seemed to beggar the question of Bigger Thomas' humanity in Native Son, Ellison acknowledged that the fictional techniques of twentieth-century white novelists were more compatible with his own ideas concerning the most im-

important functions of literature in our modern age and the roles that black characters could play in these narratives.

In his well-known critical survey of contemporary American novels, Ihab Hassan identifies several shared characteristics of these prose works:

> The central fact about fiction in a mass society may be this: that as the modes of behavior congeal into a hard, uniform crust, the hero attempts to discover alternate modes of life on levels beneath the frozen surface. The new hero is a diver, a subterranean, and this accounts for the aesthetic distance which the formal resources of the novel puts between him and the standardized realm of social behavior. . . . Forced beneath the surface, the hero in a mass society lacks some measure of definition, lacks the basis to distinguish between illusion and reality which the traditional novel afforded. . . . The pattern of fiction is therefore one that recognizes disorder--gratituitous actions, demonic intrusions, obsessive motives. The form reflects the inward darkness of things. . . . In short, the novel becomes all metaphor, a metaphor of duplicity and unreason, and a high tension is maintained between the form of fiction and these turmoils of the modern psyche which psychoanalysis has raised to the levels of consciousness. . . . There are no accepted norms of feeling or conduct to which the hero may appeal. The eternal verities are either denied or affirmed in the spirit of irony. Courage, therefore, is the prime virtue because it is the virtue of self-sufficiency. It confers dignity on meaninglessness. The hero, as it is said, encounters nothingness, and his courage is the courage of simply being.[4]

Significantly, Hassan frequently refers to Ellison's Invisible Man,[5] a fiction that attempts to illuminate the blackness of invisibility, to exemplify these characteristics. Besides pinpointing similarities between Ellison's narrative method and the artistic impulses of Hemingway and Faulkner, the references highlight the critical acclaim that IM had received even before 1965, when a Book Week poll deemed it the most distinguished novel written during a twenty-year period beginning in 1945. Since that time two special issues of literary journals, at least three

casebooks, and a welter of scholarly commentary have focused attention on Ellison's depiction of a sensitive young black protagonist who discovers the perplexities and permutations of Afro-American self-identification.[6] Repeatedly caught up in ambivalences and ambiguities shrouding his status as both a black and an American, the Invisible Man assumes different roles in relation to his interplay with various individuals and groups attempting to impose identity upon him. Only near the conclusion of the novel does he recognize that these attempts, as well as his own failure to shape his individual integrity, have rendered him invisible. Addressing his readers from an underground retreat where he analyzes the lessions he has learned about his changeable, frequently tenuous past links to others, he speculates, "Who knows but that, on lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (p. 568).

This speculation points to Ellison's reliance on metaphor as a syndetic element throughout IM. His objective is to present the titular character as an American whose recognition of the attitudes of others toward his blackness enables him to grasp the complexities of a dual cultural heritage. Recalling that the Negro served as both a popular symbol of suffering humanity and a stereotyped presence in earlier American literature, Ellison set out to emphasize for an ideal audience of black and white readers both the representativeness of the protagonist's search for answers to his identity and the uniqueness of the protagonist's racial background. As George E. Kent observes, "in relation to its nameless protagonist, the story delivers itself through at least three wave lengths, none in the form of the novel completely separable from another: the hero as cosmic man, with the inescapable duty to gather up and affirm reality, despite social oppression; the hero as victim, struggling with a cultural

machinery that would reduce him to a negative sign; and the hero as an allegory of black struggle in American history."[7]

Moreover, Ellison himself, in an introduction to the 30th Anniversary edition of IM, comments on the interconnectedness of these wave lengths and on the difficulties he faced in developing a narrative strategy that would allow his anticipated readers to respect the terms of the titular character's identity quest:

> So my task was one of revealing the human universals hidden within the plight of one who was both black and American, and not only as a means of conveying my personal vision of possibility, but as a way of dealing with the sheer rhetorical challenge involved in communicating across our barriers of race and religion, class, color, and region--barriers which consist of the many strategies of division that were designed, and still function, to prevent what would otherwise have been a more or less natural recognition of the reality of black and white fraternity. And to defeat this national tendency to deny the common humanity shared by my character and those who might happen to read of his experience, I would have to provide him with something of a world-view, give him a consciousness in which serious questions would be raised, provide him with a range of diction that could play upon the richness of our readily shared vernacular speech and construct a plot that would bring him in contact with a variety of American types as they operated on various levels of society. Most of all, I would have to approach racial stereotypes as a given fact of the social progress and proceed, while gambling with the reader's capacity for fictional truth, to reveal the human complexity which stereotypes are intended to conceal. (p. xviii)

Not all critics, however, have been willing to concede that Ellison handles metaphor successfully within the novel. Noting an apparent "ambivalence concerning the images and symbols of black as opposed to American life,"[8] these readers detect a radical disjunction between the vehicle and tenor in Ellison's metaphorical formula. Consequently, Gayle, for example, finds fault with the narrative and its protagonist; for Gayle, the concept of group solidarity in historical perspective within IM is

forcibly subordinated to a larger perspective accentuating the Invisible Man's willingness to deny his racial heritage:

> Like the hero of The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, Ellison's protagonist chooses death over life, opts for non-creativity in favor of creativity, chooses the path of individualism instead of racial unity. . . . Though the strength, vitality, and beauty of the novel derives from its subject matter--race--critics, black and white, with verbal assists from Ellison, argue that the novel is "one which moves beyond race" to deal with a common culture and to postulate the possibilities inherent in American society for all men, irrespective of race, religion, or color.[8]

Implicit in Gayle's commentary is an attitude toward racial self-awareness that posits a communal and unilateral concept of blackness in the American scheme of things. Yet, in his discussion of folkloric elements incorporated in IM, Ellison suggests that American black experience becomes universalized in offering a variety of responses to social phenomena:

> One ironic witness to the beauty and universality of this art is the fact that the descendants of the very men who enslaved us can now sing the spirituals and find in the singing an exultation of their own humanity. Just take a look at some of the slave songs, blues, folk ballads; their possibilities for the writer are infinitely suggestive. Some of them have named human situations so well that a whole corps of writers could not exhaust their universality. For instance, here's an old slave verse:
>
> Old Aunt Dinah, she's just like me
> She work so hard she want to be free
> But old Aunt Dinah's gittin' kinda ole
> She's afraid to go to Canada on account of the cold.
>
> Ole Uncle Jack, now he's a mighty "good nigger"
> You tell him that you want to be free for a fac'
> Next thin you know they done stripped the skin off
> your back.
>
> Now old Uncle Ned, he want to be free
> He found his way north by the moss on the tree
> He cross that river floating in a tub
> The patateroller give him a mighty close rub.

> It's crude, but in it you have three universal attitudes toward the problem of freedom. You can refine it and sketch in the psychological subtleties and historical and philosophical allusions, action and what not, but I don't think its basic definition can be exhausted. Perhaps some genius could do as much with it as Mann has done with the Joseph story.[9]

In this well-known example of Afro-American folklore, the American slave's desire for freedom enlarges to embrace the quest of all men for freedom, and a narrow social dynamic amplifies to subsume important historical, psychological, and philosophical issues.

Whereas Ellison's severest critics insist that "men and women are social creatures whose nature and character are molded by social experience and that the writer's duty is to seek to improve it and thus the lot of people," Ellison argues the individualist's position--"that human beings are creatures of will and their lives are what they make of them, that individuals determine the nature of reality exclusive of social considerations, and that the writer's responsibility is to self and only to self and only to society insofar as art is broadly humanistic in function."[10] Whereas these critics locate the protagonist's invisibility in his remaining unseen by white Americans who would label him and other members of his race social inferiors, Ellison's definition of invisibility refers to any arbitrary system of classification or pigeonholing or labeling that fails to recognize individuation. Therefore, stereotyping is condemned throughout IM not because it concentrates on the shortcomings of blacks as seen from a racist white American viewpoint, but because the process obscures the discrete particulars of personal selfhood. Within the first paragraph of the narrative, the protagonist (in his reflective mode) tells us, "I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and

much painful boomeranging to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself" (p. 13). Before he arrives at this crucial insight, he finds himself entangled in a number of situations circumscribing his identity, but eventually he grasps the relevance of a college professor's interpretation of Stephen's problem in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: "Stephen's problem, like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the uncreated features of his face. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals" (pp. 345-46).

Even though Ellison denounced injustices against blacks in reviews and interviews before 1952, the initial date of publication of his novel, the composition of IM signals a change in his attitudes toward racially specific forms of protest, a change reflecting his feeling that black characters could emerge in fiction as representatives of all men coping with the hardships of life--i.e., as collective symbols of Man. Thus, he could declare that all literature underscores the problems of minorities because the individual in a minority and that the chief significance of his own novel lies in its "experimental attitude, its attempt to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy which typified the best of our nineteenth-century fiction," and its possibility of shaping itself into a fiction "which, leaving sociology to the scientists, can arrive at the truth about the human condition."[11] Analyzing correlations between Ellison's ideas both in and about the novel, Donald Gibson finds that

> Invisible Man marks the point at which Ellison begins to insist on the Americanness of the black experience, on the importance of formal considerations in art, on himself as artist and not polemicist in his novel, on the relation between American art and American nationalism, and on the autonomy of art. It was only after Invisible

> Man that he could say with such amplomb in a comment about Malraux (1955), "Most of the social realists of the period were concerned less with tragedy than with injustice. I wasn't and I am not primarily concerned with injustice, but with art." The social and political positions Ellison articulates in public forums almost all find their fictional representation in Invisible Man.[12]

Discussing the genesis of IM, Ellison tells us in his introduction that a short story published eight years before the novel--i.e., one year before he began work on IM--centralizes a character whose "difficulty in seeing himself" (p. xi) provided an inspriation for the longer work. Because "Flying Home"[13] introduces several motifs, symbols, and conflicts that also appear in IM, a brief discussion of the story offers insights into his narrative method and thematic concerns.

Complexly structured as a story within a story, "Flying Home" presents a black pilot denied an opportunity to fight against America's enemies in World War II air combat. When Todd's aircraft crash-lands on a plantation owned by a Southern racist who has murdered five black men, Todd, because of an ankle injury, become dependent on assistance offered by an old black tenant farmer who marvels at Todd's ability to fly. Realizing that Todd has not yet been allowed to serve his country because of racial barriers, the old man relates a tall tale rooted in Afro-American oral folklore to pass the time. In the tale the tenant farmer, having died and gone to heaven, is grounded by St. Peter, an old white man, for flying too fast and disturbing white angels. Booted out of heaven after he forgetfully ignores St. Peter's warning, the old man is given a map of Alabama and sent to that state as punishment for his having flown too fast.

Embarrassed by this seeming parable about continuing racial restrictions, a story that forces him to acknowledge his shared slave heritage

with the old man, Todd feels humiliated when he thinks of all the other old blacks who considered his talent a worthy achievement in itself. The pain of his injury causing him to reflect on his childhood, he recalls his fascination with flying things, his having mistaken a buzzard for a paper kite, and his abortive attempt to catch an airplane swooping close to the roof of his house on one of the strangest days in his life. When he mutters the word "buzzard" and listens to the farmer explain that these birds are frequently called "jimcrows" by Southern blacks, Todd's humiliations increases. Attempting to distance himself mentally from the farmer and others like the old man who might cast historical shadows over his still unfulfilled aspirations, Todd convinces himself that he is cut off from these chroniclers of racial adversity "by age, by understanding, by sensibility, by technology, and by his need to measure himself against the mirror of other men's appreciation." When he hears the rumbling of a small black dot far above him, he remembers that his own plane stands as a symbol of his individual potential. Buoyed up by the arrival of two men in white uniforms, he soon becomes shocked to find himself straitjacketed by these attendants and ordered off the land by the plantation owner who accompanies them.

In his description of the pilot as a "man of two worlds . . . misperceived in both and thus at ease in neither" (p. xi), Ellison likens the isolation of this character to the Invisible Man's. Its action centered in Todd's consciousness, "Flying Home" advances its story line through contrasted symbolism and inversions. Ellison also carefully parallels physical discomfort with psychological torment to depict the plantation as a setting of chaos and confusion. Most important, Ellison emphasizes separations within the story. Todd attempts to black out a childhood recollection of his mother's having been denied the right to

vote, urges the old man more than once to end the latter's dialect-filled story, and find himself taken away from his damaged plane. Although on one level the story presents Todd as a black anti-hero unable to accept painful reminders of his racial heritage, Ellison places the experience of the flier "into a context that includes the stories of Icarus, the prodigal son, and the fall of man"[14] and draws upon an allusion to the myth of the phoenix to suggest that Todd's viewpoints are elevated above specific racial reference. As he walks away in the straitjacket between the Southern white man and the black farmer, Todd "flies home" to an understanding of the limitations--physical and psychological--that both men would place upon him. The story ends, however, optimistically. Todd looks into the sky and sees the aircraft above him glide like a bird "into the sun and glow like a bird of flaming gold." The transmutation of blackness into gold through the phoenix myth indicates that Ellison wanted his readers to see Todd as a potential hero challenged to keep aspiring to his goals despite all restrictions placed in his way.

Like Todd, the Invisible Man comes to understand that he alone must accept ultimate responsibility for defining himself in relation to his goals. Manipulated by whites and deceived by other blacks in the novel, he sees at its conclusion that as a black he faces the same problems as other Americans in fathoming his connections with others. Although often familiarized with images, folklore, and artifacts of his racial past, he learns that his quest for self-definition shapes itself as a recognizable twentieth-century quest for unambiguous integrity.

The numerous challenges and frustrations that the Invisible Man encounters find their origin in the cloudy deathbed advice of his Grandfather, whom the protagonist is said to "take after": "Son, after I'm gone

I want you to keep up the good fight. In never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or but wide open" (p. 16). The speech lodges itself in the protagonist's mind and becomes a "constant puzzle" because the terms of the advice are unclear. Read one way, the speech suggests that the Grandfather's posture of acquiescent resistance offers a reliable strategem that the grandson can use in his dealings with whites. At first accepting this interpretation as feasible, he finds an opportunity to test out his Grandfather's wisdom when he delivers a high-school valedictory address to a group of prominent white businessmen at a smoker.

A slip of the tongue causes him apprehension when his Southern listeners hear him substitute the phrase "social equality" for "social responsibility." Because no other part of the speech arouses criticism, he is confused in determining if the speech accords with his Grandfather's advice on duplicity. The slip is unintentional, not a calculated verbal mancuver to shape his thoughts through artifice to appeal to his auditors, yet it becomes elevated to symbolic significance because it raises questions concerning his personal and social identity in relation to the whites. Because the businessmen are generally pleased with his performance, he wonders whether his address stands out as a success or a failure.

Equally disturbing is the series of events preceding the speech. Grouped with nine other blacks on a back-entrance elevator, the Invisible man learns that the others and he are to provide entertainment at the smoker. The first phase of this entertainment involves their watching a nude blonde move suggestively in front of them as the whites yell out

catcalls marking the prurience of the scene. Next, he and the other youths are forced to participate in a boxing-ring Battle Royal to compete for a prize given to the last black to remain standing. Finally, he and the other blacks are further humiliated when they dive for counterfeit coins on an electrified carpet.

Although his having to take part in these entertainments reduces the titular character to a Sambo figure for the amusement of the white onlookers, he nevertheless believes that his status is markedly different from that of the other blacks around him. This perception of a more important identity than theirs is emphasized in his commentary on them:

> I had some misgivings over the Battle Royal, by the way. Not from a distaste for fighting but because I didn't care too much for theother fellows who were to take part. They were tough guys who seemed to have no grandfather's curse worrying their minds. No one could mistake their toughness. And besides, I suspected that fighting a Battle Royal might detract from the dignity of my speech. In these pre-invisible days I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington. But the other fellows didn't care too much for me either, and there were nine of them. I felt superior to them in my way, and I didn't like the manner in which we were all crowded together into the servants' elevator. Nor did they like my being there. In fact, as the warmly lighted floors flashed past the elevator we had words over the fact that I, by taking part in the fight, had knocked one of their friends out of a night's work. (pp. 17-18)

Even though several readers have found fault with the protagonist for these reflections and have seized upon the commentary as evidence of his hurry to disclaim racial solidarity, the description reveals that the nine blacks hold the protagonist in as much disfavor as he accords them. After the speech he recieves a scholarship to the "state normal school for Negroes" and a briefcase, in which he will later carry symbolic vestiges of his racial history. In outlining the Battle Royal scenes, Ellison intended to presage other conflicts that his protagonist would face

in distinguishing himself from other blacks as he is simultaneously set apart from whites.

The Invisible Man's three years of diligent study at the Southern college earns him a position of trust and respect, justifying his being chosen to chauffeur Mr. Norton, one of the college's white trustees, around the campus on Founders Day. Accidentally driving Norton too far from a main highway, the protagonist approaches the cabin of Trueblood, a black known to the college students as a man who has impregnated both his wife and daughter. Because Norton insists on talking with Trueblood, the protagonist must endure revulsion as he holds down his head while Trueblood recounts the circumstances leading up to his incestuous relationship with his daughter. Sharing vicariously in the retelling of a sexual dream that led to Trueblood's disgrace in the black community but gained him protection from Southern whites, Norton surfaces formerly suppressed thoughts about his own deceased daughter. Overcome emotionally by Trueblood's recital, Norton asks to be driven to a restaurant for a stimulant after paying the black blues singer $100 to buy presents for his children.[15]

At the Golden Day, a gambling house with prostitutes, both Norton and the central character find themselves surrounded by chaos as patients from a nearby mental institution take advantage of the absence of their attendant to wreck the establishment. Talkative in Norton's presence, one of the veterans a Spenglerian scenario for a day when the black race will triumph over the white as "Ethiopia spreads her wings." Yet, a second patient, a fat manic depressive, offers a far more frightening insight into the relationship shared by the black student and the white Bostonian. Addressing Norton as a "trustee of consciousness," the vet de-

clares, "To you, he [the protagonist] is a mark on the score-card of your achievement, a thing and not a man; a child, or even less--a black amorphous thing. And you, for all your power, are not a man to him, but a God, a force--" (p. 93). In addition, this avatar of the Grandfather spells out for Norton the terms of racial relationship that cause the protagonist to apotheosize influential whites: "He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!" (p. 92).

Although the Invisible Man realizes that the Trueblood episode and the riot at the Golden Day can subject him to disciplinary action, he is shocked to hear the extremely harsh admonishment that he receives from Bledsoe, the distinguished black president of the school: "Haven't you the sense God gave a dog? We take these white folks where we want them to go, we show them what we want them to see. Don't you know that? I thought you had some sense. . . . You're black and living in the South--did you forget how to lie? . . . Why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie!" (pp. 100. 136-37). Bledsoe's outburst constrasts sharply with the humility that this college official displays before white benefactors visiting the campus. Learning an important lesson from him on interpersonal relationships, the protagonist soon understands that Bledsoe will at a moment's notice deceive white people and exploit blacks to achieve power.

Because the protagonist has transported Norton across a highly visible white line separating the two divisions of a highway leading away from the campus, the finds himself suspended from school. After listening to a speech by the blind Rev. Homer Barbee on the origins of the college,

he decides to earn money in New York, a city he has never before visited, before returning to continue his education. Despite the revelation of Bledsoe's duplicity, he accepts seven sealed letters of introduction to white men capable of helping him. Thus, having violated a rigid Southern code governing racial distances, he leaves the school. In departing, however, he keeps in mind an image of a statue depicting the Founder as a black man with a veil either lifting the cloth above the faces of blacks or lowering it over their eyes.

In transit, he discovers that the same vet who had labeled his identity "amorphous" is one of his fellow passengers. In addition to offering an accurate prediction that the protagonist will experience freedom in the North by dancing with a white woman, the vet recognizes that Norton's having been introduced to off-limits areas near the college explains not only his own sudden transfer to another hospital but the protagonist's early departure from his classes. Advising the protagonist to "learn to look beneath the surface" of things and to "play the game, but don't believe in it" (p. 151), the vet identifies agents of manipulation that can cause the black youth more frustration--"white folks, authority, the gods, fate, circumstances," and, presumably, any other "force that pulls your strings until you refuse to be pulled any more" (p. 152).

But the Invisible Man does not accept this advice. Instead, he looks optimistically ahead to a profitable summer to be made possible by one of the envelopes he delivers to the offices of their recipients. When six of his inquiries remain inexplicably unanswered, he gambles on hand-delivering the seventh directly to a Mr. Emerson, his last prospective financial savior. From Emerson Jr., however, he learns that Bledsoe has urged each of the Northern businessmen to keep him uninformed of his permanent separation from the Southern college. When this young

homosexual allows him to read the contents of the last letter, the protagonist grasps the extent of Bledsoe's ruthlessness and becomes aware that Emerson Sr. would have played a part in a design calculated to keep him running. Although Emerson Jr. mentions a possible source of employment at a Long Island paint factory, the Invisible Man weighs another, more important statement from the businessman's son, the notion that no one has identity any more. Reflecting on what he has now discovered, he acknowledges that other have expected him to fit into a neat formula corresponding to their own ideas of what he should or should not be: "Everyone seemed to have some plan for me, and beneath that some more secret plan. . . . I had seen the letter and it had practially ordered me killed" (p. 190).

On his long ride to Long Island he determines to vent his anger against Bledsoe and to defy this powerful black figure by making himself successful in New York despite the poisonous letters. Nevertheless, in his encounters with Kimbrough and Brockway he discovers that his identity is still tenuous and that he is still capable of being taken advantage of. In attempting to follow Kimbrough's ill-delineated instructions on preparing the plant's chief product, an Optic White covering for national monuments, the titular character mixes exactly ten drops of a black substance into the paint to intensify its whiteness. When he runs out of the black fluid and refills his dropper from one of seven look-alike vats, he mistakenly dilutes the paint with turpentine so that a gray film reveals itself beneath the paint's surface. In shaping this scene, Ellison draws upon an abundance of color symbolism to describe the circumstances leading up to the protagonist's being shifted to another assignment. "Doubling back" on previous symbols, Ellison links the ten black drops to the ten black youths in the Battle Royal sequence and

correlates the seven vats with the seven envelopes containing the letters from Bledsoe. Although on one level the pattern of color symbolism suggests that the Invisible Man's black identity is subsumed out of existence into whiteness, the gray tinge in the paint samples that must be discarded indicates that his blackness remains a constant in an ineradicable co-existence with whiteness.

In the basement of the factory, the Invisible Man's strained relationship with Brockway, the black man responsible for preparing the paint's fluid base, compounds the confusion of human relationships viewed from perspectives broader than race. To Brockway, who has laid the foundation for the factory and has a blueprint of every inch of the building recorded eidetically in his mind, the protagonist appears a threat to long-term job security. Self-conscious of his knowledge and authority in the plant's underground yet fearful of unionized efforts to wrest some of this power away from him, Brockway emerges as a shrewd trickster figure, a black man capable of manipulating much more influential white men to his own financial advantage. Ellison relies on Brockway's characterization to force the protagonist to consider the complications of group identity. After stumbling into a union meeting of factory employees, the protagonist becomes targeted as a scab by these white workers and as a fink by Brockway, who condemns their organization. The latter label causing the two men to fight in a struggle the the Invisible man ultimately wins, Brockway avenges himself by giving the protagonist mistaken directions on turning a guage so that a subsequent explosion renders the titular character unconscious.

Upon his release from the factory hospital, where he is spared the pain of a pre-frontal lobotomy, the Invisible Man learns that he has been denied an opportunity to return to work. Because of the factory's poli-

cy of "enlightened humanitarianism," however, he receives compensation for his injuries. When this money begins to dwindle, he welcomes the attention of Mary Rambo, a Harlemite whose motherly concern for her new boarder allows him at least temporarily to overcome his depression. To Mary, he stands out as a representative of Southern black youth intellectually capable of bringing about changes in society. Although he is grateful to her for the credit that she extends him on his rent, he quickly becomes discomfited by her frequent discussion of the role she wants him to assume to improve racial relations. At this point in the narrative, he starts to sense that all the other characters with whom he has come in contact have in one way or another created roles for him, roles not of his own choosing: "If only all the contradictory voices shouting inside my head would calm down and sing a song of unison, whatever it was I wouldn't care as long as they sang without dissonance; yes, and avoided the uncertain extremes of the scale. . . . What and how much had I lost by trying to do only what was expected of me instead of what I myself wished to do?" (pp. 253, 260).

With his indoctrination into the Brotherhood, Ellison's fictionalized collective of Stalinist historians and economists, he accepts for a time a strong group identity as a means of attaining self-knowledge. His spontaneous speech upon watching an old, Southern-origin black couple being evicted from their Harlem apartment attracts the notice of Jack, the Brotherhood leader, who questions the weakness of his ties to others: "I can't believe that you're such an individualist as you pretend. . . . Sometimes the difference between individual and organized indignation is the difference between criminal and political action" (pp. 286, 287). In choosing to disaffiliate himself from Mary, the protagonist recognizes that the <u>we</u> he can use in speeches for Jack's

group is extensively broader than her use of the pronoun in dialogues urging him to racial leadership. Whereas her conception of leadership remains unfocused, the Brotherhood offers him the prospect of becoming a new Booker T. Washington. Although he detects an irony in noting that the "very job which might make it possible for [him] to do some of the things which she expected of [him] required that he leave her" (p. 308), he justifies his decision even before he shatters the iron Sambo-image door stopper that appears a relic of racial self-mockery.

Set over against that self-mockery is the self-respect he feels upon being named the Brotherhood's chief spokesman for its Harlem unit. The white women in the group give him a "direct, what-type-of-man-have-we-here kind of look that [seems] to go beneath [his] skin" (p. 295), and the racially mixed crowd to whom he delivers his first authorized speech responds to his words with "claims broader than race" (p. 345). At first, the price that he pays for his newfound respect seems relatively small; without hesitation he accepts a new Brotherhood identity and a new name scribbled on a slip of paper inside an envelope. Later, however, he discovers that the problem of determining his status in a group relationship makes the path he charts toward self-identity even more tortuous.

Weakening his faith in collective political consciousness is the insane eloquence of Ras the Exhorter, a Marcus Garvey-like character who addresses his Harlem audiences astride a horse. A black nationalist, Ras accuses the protagonist and Tod Clifton, leader of the Brotherhood youth movement, of surrendering their black identity by affiliating themselves with deceptive white men:

> Brothers are the same color; how the hell you call these white men brother? . . . We sons of Mama Africa, you done forgot? You black, BLACK! you--Godahm, mahn! he said,

> swinging the knife for emphasis. You got bahd hair! You got thick lips! They say you stink! They hate you, mahn. You African. AFRICAN! Why you with them? . . . Look at you two and look at me--is this sanity? Standing here in three shades of blackness! Three black men fighting in the street because of the white enslaver? Is that sanity? Is that consciousness, scientific understanding? Is that the modern black mahn of the twentieth century? (pp. 361, 363).

Even though both the protagonist and Clifton reject Ras's strident rhetoric on the virtues of black solidarity, his speech leaves its impact on Clifton, whom the protagonist later learns has accidentally pummeled a white Brotherhood member as a consequence of this white man's failure to wear identifying insignia. And although the protagonist becomes so steeped in Brotherhood ideology that he can quote the group's policy statements to newspaper reporters, he nevertheless begins to acknowledge certain difficulties in declaring that "individuals don't count for much; it's what the group wants, what the group does. Everyone here submerges his personal ambitions for the common achievement" (p. 387).

After Clifton dies at the hands of a white policeman, the Invisible Man acts on his own initiative to organize a funeral rally for the fallen Brotherhood figure. Subsequently condemned by treacherous members of the group who accuse him of being a self-serving and secretly ambitious orator, he sees that his role in the group is uncertain. Whereas for the protagonist Clifton's death had symbolized the sacrifice of a "man and Negro" forced "outside history," to the Brotherhood Clifton's sales of Sambo-like dolls had marked him as a traitor to the group's philosophies. Stung by the Brotherhood's labeling the youth leader an individual "politically without meaning" (p. 436), he vows to undermine the efforts of Jack and the other members when he learns that he is to be transferred out of Harlem to concentrate on the Woman Question.

With a shift in settings comes a shift in perspectives. Although he places black men together with whites under the umbrella of Americanism when he again confronts Ras, in this case he voices a sentiment in which he no longer wholeheartedly believes. From Hambro, a Brotherhood mentor, he learns that "one group of brothers must be sacrificed to that of the whole" (p. 490), a philosophy that discounts the significance of the improverished black residents of New York City and their problems. In being misidentified for Rinehart, a Harlemite with multiple hustles for making money, he finds advantages in assuming the role of a black confidence man to sabotage the whites. As he reflects on the humiliation that he has already undergone from his interactions with whites, he defines one important dimension of his invisibility in racial terms:

> And now all past humiliations became precious parts of my experience, and for the first time, leaning against the stone wall in the sweltering night, I began to accept my past and, as I accepted it, I felt memories welling up inside me. It was as though I'd learned suddenly to look around corners; images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate expriences. They were me; they defined me. I was my experiences, and my experiences were me, and no blind men, no matter how powerful they became, even if they conquered the world, could take that, or change one single itch, taunt, laugh, cry, scar, ache, rage or pain of it. They were blind, bat blind, moving only by the echoed sounds of their own voices. And because they were blind they would destroy themselves and I'd help them. I laughed. Here I had thought they accepted me because color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn't see either color or men. For all they were concerned, we were so many names scribbled on fake ballots, to be used at their convenience and when not needed to be filed away. It was a joke, an absurd joke. And now I looked around a corner of my mind and saw jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure. They were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the ar-

> rogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same--except I now recognized my invisibility. (pp. 496-97)

Yet, this racial hold on identity also gives way when he finds himself swept up in a Harlem riot. Attaching himself to a small band of looters intent upon burning down their own vermin-filled apartment house, he sees that his personal identity is eradicated within the chaos of darkness:

> I went into the crowd, walking slowly, smoothly into the dark crowd, the whole surface of my skin alert, my back chilled, looking, listening to those moving with a heaving and sweating and a burr of talk around me and aware that now that I wanted to see them, needed to see them, I could not; feeling them, a dark mass in motion on a dark night, a black river ripping through a black land, and Ras or Tarp could move beside me and I wouldn't know. I was one with the mass, moving down the littered street over the puddles of oil and milk, my personality blasted. (p. 537)

Chased into a manhole by two white policemen, themselves "almost invisible in black shirts" (p. 523), he chooses to remain underground to sort out the meaning of his past experiences and to reconsider his Grandfather's riddle. His new interpretation of his forebear's last words asserts the principle of democracy as a positive value to be defended over and over again against the strongest voices of doubt or denial. A new knowledge about himself having been gained from this reinterpretation, he acknowledges the possibility of having a socially responsible role to play before reminding us of the way that his experiences parallel our own misconceptions about idenity in a world of conflict, confusion, and change.

"There's nothing like isolating a man to make him think" (p. 458); so says one of the numerous secondary characters on whom Ellison draws to emphasize his thematic concerns. In isolating the Invisible Man to al-

low him to achieve a heightened sense of self-awareness, Ellison recognized that he was running the risk of alienating certain readers who might find fault with the specialized portraiture of the central character as a man searching for his identity while his black identity simultaneously yet unsuccessfully searches for him.[17] Indeed, several readers have noted with regret that the protagonist establishes no long-lasting relationship with any other black character in the novel. Yet, many of these same readers detect within the narrative a recognizable pattern of Afro-American history in his facing discrimination in the South, undertaking a Great Migration to the North, and finding himself exploited by capitalists and courted by Stalinists in a large urban setting. In one of the middle chapters, a woman member of the Brotherhood questions whether the protagonist is black enough to appeal to Harlem audiences; these readers would share her doubts.

These demurrers raise concerns about the stability of metaphor in the novel.[18] In attempting to use the odyssey of a young man who happens to be black as a model for the journeys of all of us toward self-knowledge, Ellison counted on the willingness of white readers to accept the metaphor unequivocably. His narrative method necessitated his protagonist's emergence as an islandized soul as bereft as Bartleby of human understanding, and his commitment to art rather than to social issues demanded that he force his protagonist to distance himself as much from the Brotherhood as he does from the yam-seller, the pushcart man, Tatlock, and Dupree. If for various readers Ellison's elaborate pattern fails to accomplish desirable ends, the fault may lie in the inability of too many of us to accept the novel on its own terms. To highlight the complexities of identity for an anticipated racially mixed readership, Ellison found it necessary to delineate the history of one black American from a revision-

ist perspective, to characterize identity as a goal rather than a given of human existence, and to describe interracial relationships and group ideologies in terms of convoluted chaos.

Notes

[1] White Man, Listen! (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 109.

[2] "Richard Wright's Blues," in Shadow and Act (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 89.

[3] "Richard Wright's Blues," p. 95.

[4] Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel; rpt. as "The Pattern of Fictional Experience," in Modern American Fiction: Essays in Criticism, ed. A. Walton Litz (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 321, 328-29.

[5] (1952; New York: Vintage, 1982). Subsequent references are parenthesized in the text.

[6] See the March 1970 issue of CLA Journal, the December 1970 issue of Black World, Joseph Trimmer, ed., A Casebook on Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (New York: Crowell, 1972), John Hersey, ed., Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), and Ronald Gottesman, ed., The Merrill Studies in Invisible Man (Columbus: Merrill, 1971). In The Craft of Ralph Ellison (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), Robert G. O'Meally offers an excellent full-length study of Ellison's fiction and essays. Jacqueline Covo has surveyed critical commentary on Ellison in The Blinking Eye: Ralph Waldo Ellison and His American, French, German and Italian Critics, 1952-1971 (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1974). An annotated bibliography of more recent scholarship appears in Joanne Giza's essay in Black American Writers: Bibliographical Essays (New York: St. Martin's, 1978), II, 47-

[7] "Ralph Ellison and Afro-American Folk and Cultural Tradition," CLA Journal, 13, no. 3 (March 1970), 257-68.

[8] The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), p. 250. In a radical vituperation of the titular character, Gayle argues that his central flaw is that he "has never known how to lie, has never been able to understand the nature of black survival in America nor roles we were forced to play" (p. 251). Cf.

William J. Schafter's assertion that the problem of identity and existence that Ellison poses "transcends the issues of social justice and equity; it is not a question of 'the Negro problem' or 'race issues'"; Schafter's comment is reprinted in Hersey, p. 126.

[9] "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," in Shadow and Act, pp. 173-74.

[10] Donald B. Gibson, The Politics of Literary Expression: A Study of Major Black Writers (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1981), pp. 59-60.

[11] "Brave Words for a Starting Occasion," in Shadow and Act, pp. 111, 113.

[12] Pp. 92-93.

[13] In The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers, ed. Langston Hughes (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), pp. 151-70.

[14] Susan L. Blake, "Black Folklore in the Works of Ralph Ellison," PMLA, 94, no. 1 (January 1979), 125. See, in addition, Joseph Timmerman, "Ralph Ellison's 'Flying Home,'" Studies in Short Fiction, 9 (1972), 175-82.

[15] Houston A. Baker Jr. identifies Trueblood as a trickster figure who refines his story to gain economic favor from whites in "To Move Without Moving: An Analysis of Creativity and Commerce in Ralph Ellison's Trueblood Episode," PMLA, 98, no. 5 (October 1983), 828-45.

[16] Although many readers are likely to identify the vet as a spokesman for Ellison, we stand on sturdier interpretive ground in remembering that this chater's bitterness is influenced by his having been chased out of a Southern town several years prior to his speech by Ku Klux Klansmen. Moreover, his insanity, which he believes has no cure, argues against our deeming him a completely reliable auctorial surrogate. Rather, his role, though intellectually heightened by Ellison, is similar to that of the black tenant farmer in "Flying Home"--i.e., he attempts to force the Invisible Man to accept the restrictive mental burdens of their shared racial past.

[17] This structural pattern is identified by Eleanor R. Wilner in "The Invisible Black Thread: Identity and Nonentity in Invisible Man," CLA Journal, 13, no. 3 (March 1970), 242-57.

[18] In an apt commentary on the delicate balance of metaphor in fiction, James Guetti argues that recurring disjunctions between the tenors and vehicles of metaphors often reduce these linguistic apparatuses to oxymorons--i.e., to pairings of opposites suggesting that metaphors undercut themselves: "A novelist cannot seriously posit a fundamental disorder

in experience if the neatness of his technique belies this supposed disorder at every turn; there is no way, in other words, to express the problem of imaginative order if it is not a real problem in the narrative, and if it is a real problem, then it inevitably has important effects upon the form of the narrative. And yet an incoherent narrative, even if juxtaposed with th assertion of an inability to compose experience, cannot stand for the expression of the failure: an incoherent narrative, of course, expresses nothing, not even incoherence. Thus, we are liable to find, in a novel that does express crucial imaginative difficulties, a complicated sort of rhetorical balance, and at the most difficult moments of this inquiry, failure and success may be nearly indistinguishable." This commentary seems especially appropriate in relation to certain discussions of Ellison's work, those finding an underlying pattern of communal racial history within the novel and subsequently questioning Ellison's ability to have his specifically black protagonist serve as a model for a collective American identity quest. For these readers, Ellison's narrative appears disjointed in its alleged failure to establish racial and historical order. See Guetti, The Limits of Metaphor: A Study of Melville, Conrad, and Faulkner (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 6-7. Cf. Hassan (cited above, note 1) and Gibson's contention that "Ellison's conception of the truth of invisibility diminishes the significance of social order and assigns to the individual psyche a greater burden than it can perhaps bear" (p. 64).

CHAPTER VI

Symbolism and Distorted Protest in Baldwin's If Beale Street Could Talk

In an essay published two years before Ellison's Invisible Man, the late Nick Aaron Ford notes that the chief weakness of Afro-American writers "has been in the area of craftsmanship and design rather than [in] theme." Ford suggests that conscientious black American writers eager to overcome deficiencies in artistic method manipulate symbols in their works to "fight the battles of race with subtlety and popularity."[1] Even though Ford recognizes protest as a legitimate concern of black writers, he argues for the development of a craftsmanship that will enable these men of letters to subordinate descriptions of injustices to literary artistry.

In a more recent discussion of distinguishing characteristics of Afro-American literature, Lance Jeffers points out that the "literature of an oppressed people is the conscience of man, and nowhere is this seen with more intense clarity than in the literature of Aframerica":

> An essential element of Afro-American literature is that the literature as a whole--not the work of occasional authors--is a movement against concrete wickedness. And in Aframerican literature, accordingly, there is a grief rarely to be found elsewhere in American literature, and frequently a rage rarely to be found in American letters: a rage different in quality, profounder, more towering, more intense--the rage of the oppressed. Whenever an Aframerican artist picks up pen or horn, his target is likely to be American racism, his subject the suffering of his people, and the core element his own grief and the grief of his people.

Yet, Jeffers also acknowledges that "Aframerican literature goes far beyong protest against injustice and the cry for a people's freedom":

> The cry for freedom and the protest against injustice are a cry for the birth of the New Man, a testament to the New Unknown World to be discovered, to be created by man. Aframerican literture is, as a body, a declaration that despite the perversion and sadism that cling like swamp-roots to the flesh of man's feet, man has unforeclosed options for freedom, for cleanliness, for wholeness, for human harmony, for goodness, for a human world. Like the spirituals that are a part of it, Aframerican literature is a passionate assertion that man will win freedom. Thus, Aframerican literature rejects despair and cynicism; it is a literature of realistic hope and life-affirmation. This is not to say that no Aframerican literary work reflects cynicism or despair, but rather that the basic theme of Aframerican literature is that man's goodness will prevail.[2]

Jeffers indicates that black American writers, through effective exploitation of important symbols within their works, can bridge polarities of cynicism and life-affirmation in literary products of various genres that depict through characterizations of frustrated blacks the struggles of all men to achieve human dignity.

In the novels, short fiction, dramas, and essays of James Baldwin, our most popular contemporary black writer, recurrent symbols of restriction alternate with symbols of optimism to highlight his image of the black man in this country as a depressed inhabitant of the "sunlit prison of the American dream."[3] Articulating his major themes for a mixed audience of black and white readers, Baldwin conceives of his black audience as a "powerful entity in need of discovering and coming to terms with its past as well as utilizing that history as a bridge to the vast and unlimited expanses of selfhood"; at the same time, he "exhorts whites to summon the courage to face their 'ghastly deeds' and realize that we will make the revolution together or not at all."[4] Moreover, Colin MacInnes observes that Baldwin's appeal to a mixed readership is

stronger than that of more militant writers because Baldwin still believes that whites are "worthy of a warning: he has not yet despaired of making us feel the dilemma we all chat about so glibly, of forcing us to see it is our problem, not the Negroes', and of trying to save us from the agonies that we too will suffer if the Negro people are driven beyond the ultimate point of desperation."[5] Baldwin is aware that "our dehumanization of the Negro is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves" and that the "loss of our own identity is the price we pay for our annulment of his."[6]

In If Beale Street Could Talk,[7] his most strident fiction of social protest, Baldwin juxtaposes two important symbols--the prison metaphor and the image of an unborn child, both used repeatedly in his earlier writings--to underscore restrictions preventing a young Harlem couple in love from marrying as a consequence of their being caught up in a pattern of injustices that we are urged to accept as still very much a part of America's racial dilemma. Originated as a personal protest against the incarceration of his friend Tony Maynard, extradited from Germany to stand trial on the accusation of his having murdered a marine in Greenwich Village, Beale Street developed into a novel that indicts the American legal system in general and the slow-turning wheels of New York City justice in specific. Although he had anticipated that Maynard's relatives and other friends would supply the means for the black soldier to secure a competent attorney and would help organize Maynard's defense, Baldwin soon discovered that he and Maynard's sister Valerie, a talented sculptress, were the only persons close to the defendant who aggressively attempted to have the mistaken accusation overturned. Depressed by his helplessness in not being able to do more for a friend, Baldwin saw the

first trial end in a hung jury, which necessitated Maynard's having to be re-tried; after the second trial, Maynard was found guilty and was subsequently sentenced to Attica State Prison in upstate New York shortly before an outbreak of violence rocked that institution.[8]

The Maynard case presented Baldwin with a situation that could be fleshed out into a fiction emphasizing the dehumanization of an individual victimized by both circumstance and skin color. Baldwin knew that his friend had been badly beaten in a German prison and had almost been killed in a riot during his confinement in this country. The fiction shaping itself in Baldwin's mind would taken into account all these horrors; he would identify completely with the situation because the "endless saga of getting Tony Maynard out of prison would seem to be what blacks could expect from white justice, even after all the events of the sixties."[9] For Baldwin, who has asserted that the "only real concern of the artist [is] to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art,"[10] the Maynard affair presented itself as an example of egregious personal chaos that a carefully crafted novel could examine to provide readers with the full weight of its implications.

During an interview granted while work on Beale Street was still in progress, Baldwin pointed out his willingness to run the risk of having the unmarried, pregnant girlfriend of a jailed black man serve as the center of consciousness in the novel:

> Her lover is in Attica, and a lot of her story is in her trips to the prison. Actually, I began writing before the Attica events. But I have a friend there. Part of the key to the book is the prison situation. She is wondering what is going to happen to the baby, and he is wondering too. He's in prison on charges of stealing a television set--he was sent up on a bullshit tip. He's still in jail when the book ends. . . . She's the only one who can tell the story. There are nine chap-

> ters, one for each month of her pregnancy. The book ends with the birth of the baby. That's what it's about, our responsibility to that baby.[11]

Baldwin, however, decided to make several significant changes to this outline for the novel. Alonzo Hunt (Fonny), a young sculptor, would be falsely accused of raping a Puerto Rican prostitute, and this plot development would send the mother of his girlfriend, Clementine Rivers (Tish), to Puerto Rico, where the attacked woman hides in seclusion, to try to convince her to reconsider her charges. Rather than presenting Fonny as having been found guilty of the rape, he decided to have the character await trial in the Tombs; instead of nine chapters, Beale Street would be divided into only two sections to allow for narrative economy. Most important, Baldwin recognized that he could have his novel approach tragic stature by accentuating ironies, juxtapositions, and symbols within the work. Fonny's decision to delay marrying Tish, even though he has formally asked permission of her parents, becomes the accident that sets the plot conflict in motion. Forced to take a series of low-paying odd jobs to support himself and her while he develops his skill in sculpting, Fonny emerges as a struggling artist who finds himself caught up in a nightmare of racial prejudice. The prospect of his becoming the father of an illegitimate child because of his being locked up is set over against a barbarous big-city legal system that denies his own father and Tish's family an opportunity to secure his release on bond. Baldwin attempts to disarm negative moral judgment on his two central characters by depicting Tish as a "black modern Madonna" and Fonny as a "symbol [of] the persecuted black man, unable to find a job; the object of the white cop's hate; the victim of his black skin; a nascent artist who, as in an act of rebellion, decides to become an artisan."[12]

If at times in Beale Street Baldwin appears to agree with more militant black writers that a "black man in prison reflects the totality of the condition of his people,"[13] he mitigates his rage with a detailed description of Fonny and Tish's love for each other and for the unborn child, who respresents the fruition of that love. Thus, counterbalancing the despair that frequently surfaces within the narrative is an undercurrent of optimism and life-affirmation advancing the narrative in opposite directions from its centralized conflict. As Tish makes numerous visits to the Tombs to speak with Fonny across a glass barrier and endures seemingly endless delays in his being brought to trial, she recognizes that the "growth of the baby is connected with [Fonny's] determination to be free" (p. 199).

That determination is bolstered by the love and support that Fonny receives from his father (Frank Hunt), from Tish's parents (Sharon and Joseph Rivers) and older sister (Ernestine), and, especially, from Tish herself. Both products of Harlem housing projects, the young couple has nurtured a love that grows out of their childhood friendship. In recalling that their playmates used to call them Romeo and Juliet, Tish indicates that her love for Fonny withstood the animosity registered by his mother and two sisters, self-righteous, arrogant women who condemn the father of Tish's child as a scapegrace who has lowered his family's high moral standards. In an important scene in which the eight members of the two families are brought together to hear the announcement of Tish's pregnancy, Mrs. Hunt curses the child in the heroine's womb and condemns its unmarried parents until her husband slaps her to the floor. Because Mrs. Hunt is identified with a narrow-minded Christianity throughout the novel and because Baldwin uncharacteristically finds fault with Christianity for its failure to help solve human problems here on earth, the

scene shows that the love of the Rivers family for Fonny, their prospective in-law, is much stronger than ritualized, traditional faith. In fact, for the first time in Baldwin's fiction, the family becomes the "unit of ultimate salvation"[14] for the young lovers and a powerful symbol of black communal experience.

Whereas Mrs. Hunt's favorite hymn is "Blessed Quietness," a title that expresses her willingness to leave to God all difficulties that she wishes to avoid confronting, her husband shares with the Rivers a recognition of the ways in which the prejudice of Bell, a white policeman, has temporarily destroyed Fonny and Tish's plans for happiness. As he evaluates his trust in Heyward, an inexperienced young attorney handling Fonny's case, Frank regrets having to place the defense of his only son in the hands of a white man. Sharon shares this concern and acknowledges over the pious objections of Mrs. Hunt that Frank is "not talking hatred" but "just telling the truth about life in this country" (p. 80). Part of this truth is designed to grant Tish an admirability despite her being an unwed girl in trouble; upon learning of her pregnancy, her father tells her that he is proud of her, and her mother places the pregnancy in historical perspective as she attempts to encourage Tish to overcome her fears: "Tish, she said, "when we was first brought here, the white man he didn't give us no preachers to say words over us before we had our babies. And you and Fonny be together right now, married or not, wasn't for that same damn white man. . . . You got to think about that baby. . . . And the rest of us, well, we going to hold on to you. And we going to get Fonny out" (pp. 40, 41). And when the two middle-age fathers analyze their troubles over beers in a neighborhood bar, Joseph reminds Frank that their children's difficulties have been created by evil American whites:

> "Look. I know what you're saying. You're saying they got us by the balls. Okay. But that's our flesh and blood, baby: our flesh and blood. I don't know how we going to do it. I just know we hve to do it. I know you ain' scared for you, and God knows I ain't scared for me. That boy is got to come out of there. That's all. And we got to get him out. That's all. And the first thing we got to do, man, is just not to lose our nerve. We can't let these cunt-faced white-assed motherfuckers get away with this shit no longer." He subsides, he sips his beer. "They been killing our children long enough." (p. 232)

Systematically, members of the two families pool their resources to put their plan into action. Ernestine expropriates her employer's car and chauffeur to pick up Sharon at an airport upon the latter's return from Puerto Rico, and Frank and Joseph routinely steal from their jobs in the garment district and on the docks to peddle the merchandise in Harlem and Brooklyn. In terms of the novel's emphasis on the mistreatment of Fonny and Tish, these actions seem reparations that carry their own moral justifications.

The common goal uniting the efforts of the two families is symbolized by a statuette that Fonny gives Sharon two years before he first makes love to Tish. Chiseled out of black wood, the statuette is a reflection of its creator, and specifically of his determination to achieve manhood and to become an admired artist despite forces threatening to defeat him: "It's not very high. . . . It's of a naked man with one hand at his forehead and the other half hiding his sex. The legs are long, very long, and very wide apart, and one foot seems planted, unable to move, and the whole motion of the figure is torment" (p. 43). On a personal level, the statuette reminds Tish of Fonny's own long legs of the two characters being "imprisoned somewhere in the silence of that wood" (p. 217). From a broader perspective, the one foot held in place focuses on the extent to which Bell has managed to frustrate their happiness. A

policeman whose jurisdiction has been shifted because of his having murdered a black Brooklyn youth, Bell--with his red hair, white skin, and blue eyes--personifies distorted concepts of law, order, and justice in the American scheme of things:

> He was somewhere in his thirties. He walked the way John Wayne walks, striding out to clean up the universe, and he believed all that shit: a wicked, stupid, infantile motherfucker. Like his heroes, he was kind of pinheaded, heavy gutted, big assed, and his eyes were as blank as George Washington's eyes. But I was beginning to learn something about the blankness of those eyes. What I was learning was beginning to frighten me to death. If you look steadily into that unblinking blue, into that pinpoint at the center of the eye, you discover a bottomless cruelty, a viciousness cold and icy. If that eye, from its height, has been forced to notice you, if you do exist in the unbelievably frozen winter which lives behind that eye, you are marked, marked, marked, like a man in a black overcoat, crawling, fleeing, across the snow. The eye resents your presence in the landscape, cluttering up the view. . . . Sometimes I was with Fonny when I crossed Bell's path, sometimes I was alone. Whe I was with Fonny, the eyes looked straight ahead, into a freezing sun. When I was alone, the eyes clawed me like a cat's claws, raked me like a rake. These eyes look only into the eyes of the conquered victim. They cannot look into any other eyes. (p. 212)

Moreover, the one hand hiding Fonny's genitals suggests the perverted homosexual attraction that links Bell's prurience with his evil: "When Fonny was alone, the same thing happened. Bell's eyes swept over Fonny's black body with the unanswerable cruelty of lust, as though he had lit the blowtorch and had it aimed at Fonny's sex" (p. 212).

Baldwin prepares us for an obligatory confrontation between his two central characters and Bell by having Levy, a friendly Jewish realtor who rents them a Lower Manhattan loft, warn them about policemen suspicious of all blacks seen after dark in that section of the city. In addition, from their friend Daniel's description of his arrest, subsequent impris-

onment, and submission to homosexual rape during a two-year confinement for a crime he did not commit, they learn of the seemingly limitless malevolence of policemen like Bell and of one motivation for racial animosity: "I don't believe there's a white man in this country, baby, who can even get his dick hard, without he hear some nigger moan" (p. 133).

In their first endounter with Bell, Tish senses the threat that he poses to their security. Harassed by a junkie in a small Italian grocery, she feels defenseless until Fonny arrives and yanks the junkie to the floor. Bell, watching the scene from across the street, rushes over to arrest Fonny for assault and battery but is prevented from doing so by the testimony of the proprietress of the store. Fonny realizes that the white woman's speaking up for a black man causes Bell an embarrassment that he will never completely erase from his mind: "That's why he's going to try to get me," Fonny says. "White men don't like it at all when a white lady tells them, You a boatful of motherfuckers, and the black cat was right, and you can kiss my ass." He grins. "Because that's what she told him. In front of a whole lot of people. And he ain't about to forget it" (p. 176). Fonny's prediction proves frighteningly accurate when Bell dogs his every move and begins to park a patrol car near Fonny's loft. The report of the Puerto Rican's rape providing him with an opportunity to retaliate against his humiliation in the grocery, Bell arrests Fonny after falsely swearing that he has seen the black character run approximately four miles from the scene of the crime.

In presenting Bell as an ogre blocking the path of love for Fonny and Tish, Baldwin simultaneously depicts him as an exemplar of racial hatred, to the extent that Tish likens the subway cars she rides to see Fonny to slave ships and refuses to look at the flags lining the Avenue

of the Americas. Nevertheless, there are problems in Baldwin's outsized depiction of this white character as a representative of calculated animosity toward blacks. Many readers will find it hard to believe that Bell, given his past trouble with blacks in Brooklyn, would dare to arouse more suspicion by hounding blacks in Manhattan, especially after the grocery scene, where witnesses voice a familiarity with his reputation. Moreover, the narrative fails to offer us a convincing motivation for his ubiquitous presence in Fonny's shadow, a presence that extends beyond normal eight-hour working assignments. Baldwin has, in fact, burdened this character with a malevolence that he cannot properly embody, and the strain upon his characterization is one unfortunate consequence of Baldwin's superimposing racial tensions over a modern, unconventional urban love story.

Another disturbing aspect of Bell's candidacy for all-purpose villainy is the deflected moral evaluation to which other characters within the novel are subjected. Frequently we are encouraged to weigh his sins against the questionable morality of other characters whom Baldwin wants us to deem as more admirable. Yet, despite his efforts to exonerate Tish and Fonny from sexual libertinism, we are disinclined to forgive the couple for their hesitancy in making arrangements to marry, especially in light of the willingness of at least some members of each of their families to support them and to care for the couple's unborn child. Thus, for many of us their difficulties are just as much attributable to moral laxity and sloth as to the mental instability of a "distraught, ignorant, Puerto Rican woman suffering from the aftereffects of rape" (p. 114). In addition, because policemen in literature frequently serve as upholders of a community's moral standards, several readers will be challenged to excuse the thefts committed by the two families to raise money for Fonny's defense. Tish's lifting goods from the department

store where she works, for example, prevents us from deeming her an undeserving victim of a series of racially tinged injustices. And even in Daniel's account of his brutal treatment at the hands of white policemen we find a basis for hesitating to rush to his moral defense; yanked from his stoop for stealing an automobile despite his not knowing how to drive, Daniel concedes that he was arrested with marijuana concealed in back pocket of his trousers and that his serving time was at least partially justified in light of his having pled guilty to the lesser of his two offenses.

These problems anticipate the ambiguous conclusion of the novel. In her last month of pregnancy, Tish learns that Frank has been caught stealing, has been dismissed from his job, and has subsequently committed suicide. Tish goes into labor upon receiving this news and provides us in the final paragraph with a vision of Fonny's liberation: "Fonny is working on the wood, on the stone, whistling, smiling. And, from far away, but coming nearer, the baby cries and cries and cries and cries and cries and cries and cries and cries, cries like it meant to wake the dead" (p. 242). Because of the numerous shifts in temporal perspectives within the novel, there is a difficulty in determining to what point in the future this final vision refers and, indeed, if Tish is daydreaming.[16] Because Baldwin's original intention was to have Tish's baby born during Fonny's incarceration, it seems likely that he wanted to juxtapose despair against life-affirmation while simultaneously juxtaposing the baby's birth with the death of one of its grandparents. Yet, other interpretations of the ending have been offered..

Just as puzzling is another juxtaposition that alerts us to the raped Puerto Rican's miscarriage just before this final vision. In a long passage in the middle of the novel on Fonny and Tish's being caught up in

the vast sweep of time, Tish acknowledges that time "cannot be bought" and that the "only coin time accepted was life" (p. 117). If this passage was meant to look ahead to the conclusion of Beale Street, it suggests that either the miscarriage or the suicide is offered as an exchange for Tish's delivery. From another perspective, however, the miscarriage means that Fonny's application for bond will be held up because the raped mother, as a result of a nervous breakdown, has been taken away to a remote section of the island. Although Tish believes that this news means that the prosecution's star witness will be unable to testify against Fonny and that the case against him will have to be dropped, her father learns that the state does not have to grand bond and that the witness can be restored to health so that she can later continue charges. Thus Baldwin, apparently confident that readers would parallel the witness' miscarriage with the miscarriage of justice in Fonny's confinement, ends his fiction with a number of questions left unanswered.

These obstructions to thematic clarity in Beale Street emphasize the weakness of the social context into which Baldwin attempts to place the frustrations of his central characters. Even though the novel "explores racial oppression from a broader social perspective than any of the preceding novels, Baldwin's analysis of the source of oppression remains the same; it emanates from the human heart."[17] In his fictions Baldwin has always faced a difficulty in separating his powerful feelings for individuals from his feelings for them as victims of social repressiveness, and the problem these works fail adequately to engage is "precisely how that integrity of the self can be projected onto a social scale: why the withdrawal into love should be seen as an appropriate model for social action since it is frequently born out of a denial of that social action."[18] As C.W.E. Bigsby points out, this ambivalence

in Baldwin's thinking is reflected in tensions within Beale Street, unresolved postures manifesting themselves in contradictions throughout the work:

> Baldwin is never clear as to whether identity is laboriously constructed out of the interplay of sensibility and event or whether it is a resilient moral principle concealed beneath social habiliments. . . . If Beale Street Could Talk contains the now-familiar tension between a faith in the redemptive power of love and a conviction that social justice will not defer to simple humanity. It is an assertion of white culpability which nonetheless contins portraits of individual whites which potentially nullify that conviction. . . . He is forced into proposing an unbridgeable gulf between the individual and his society--a romantic stance which negates his conviction that black people's "destinies are finally in their own hands" and that a human being can "change the world in which he finds himself."[19]

In large part, these contradictions are traceable to Baldwin's attempts "to turn every recital of his own life into the most urgent symbols of American crisis" and to compose fiction "in order to use up his private difficulties."[20] Like Wright in "Long Black Song" Baldwin links the most important symbols in Beale Street to personal, subjective experience rather than to a more objective, social reality. Thus, the prison metaphor looks back to his description of the psychological trauma he experienced in "Equal in Paris" upon being jailed over a Christmas holiday as well as to his well-known commentaries on the imprisonment of black and white Americans within limiting racial stereotypes and the entrapment of the American male burdened with the urgency of exhibiting an unwavering image of machismo ("The Male Prison"). Additonally, the unborn child, besides encouraging the reader to associate Tish with the Virgin Mary, recalls his numerous accounts of the mutual hatred that he shared with his stepfather, who condemned him for being both physically

unattractive and illegitimate. Significantly, in revealing the source of psychological scars identified with his childhood, Baldwin tells us that he found compensating love in caring for his younger brothers and sisters. Consequently, we find a justification in applying a psycho-biographical approach to Baldwin's fictions because these childhood anxieties are exploited over and over again in transferences of recalled filial conflicts to intrafamilial confrontations and recollections of sibling love to a latent optimism asserting itself as a weak hope that love can overcome all forms of adversity.

In one important sense, then, Beale Street represents an effort on Baldwin's part to exploit the therapeutic value of literature to resolve a tension between hatred and love. That this tension remains unresolved at the conclusion of the novel points to the strength of warring impulses in Baldwin's psyche. In terms of the aesthetic dimensions of the novel, we see that this problem affects Baldwin's narrative style. Although he ultimately chooses the first-person viewpoint to funnel information through Tish's consciousness, at times the work shifts abruptly and awkwardly to a third-person perspective, signaling Baldwin's desire for the freedom of a narrative stance that could "offer wide-ranging social and political insights."[21] In addition, we see that the Shakespearean eloquence of many of Tish's reveries clash harshly with an accretion of "four-letter words and their derivatives"[22] assigned to her and to other black characters when Baldwin strains his prose with unfocused racial rhetoric. And whereas culpability for Fonny and Tish's hardships is shifted in narrative midstream from the Hunt women to Bell, plot details fail to provide us with either a strong enough counter to Mrs. Hunt's castigation of her son for his amorality or a credible explanation for

the policeman's persistent malevolence. We are not adequately persuaded to endorse Fonny's taking on jobs as a short-order cook to avoid placing himself under the supervision of a white employer, and we are puzzled at Tish's reflection on the racial prejudice that members of her family experienced in the South, since Mrs. Hunt, the only character with a Southern background and the only one to whom the commentary could apply, denies us a substantiation of this charge. Indeed, because Fonny's mother extols racial harmony over black-and-white agitation, we detect evidence of Baldwin's determination to pad his narrative with statements on interracial dynamics that seem out of place in the tapestry of an unorthodox and deliberately shocking love story.

These structural and thematic problems indicate that Beale Street is an ultimately unsuccessful, bifurcated novel that tries to extend to its two central characters an elevation that they cannot reach as it attempts to illuminate for black and white readers various injustices against these characters, who themselves, though poor and black, lack a requisite moral stature to justify their presentation as undeserving victims of urban mistreatment. A novel too close to the real-life event that inspired its composition, Beale Street finds Baldwin himself entrapped in an experimental narrative mode, one in which eloquence is subordinated to a rhetoric of outrage--sometimes broadly social, sometimes specifically racial--as excessive as it is discordant.

Notes

[1] "A Blueprint for Negro Authors," Phylon (1950); rpt. in Black Expression: Essays by and about Black Americans in the Creative Arts, ed. Addison Gayle Jr. (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969), pp. 276, 279.

[2] "Aframerican Literature: The Conscience of Man," in Black Scholar, Jan. 1979; rpt. in New Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: New American Library, 1972), pp. 506-07.

[3] Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," in Notes of a Native Son (New York: Bantam, 1955), p. 14.

[4] Louis H. Pratt, James Baldwin (Boston: Twayne, 1978), pp. 23-24.

[5] "Dark Angel: The Writings of James Baldwin," Encounter, 21 (1963), 23.

[6] Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," in NNS, p. 19.

[7] (New York: New American Library, 1974). Further references are indicated parenthetically.

[8] Derogatory references to Nelson A. Rockefeller (p. 108), governor of New York during the Attica uprisings, indicate that Baldwin had these prison disturbances in mind while composing the novel. For an account of Baldwin's involvement in the Maynard case, see W.J. Weatherby, Squaring Off: Mailer vs. Baldwin (New York: Mason / Charter, 1977), pp. 178-80.

[9] Weatherby, p. 180.

[10] Baldwin, "Autobiographical Notes," in NNS, p. 5.

[11] Herbert R. Lottman, "It's Hard to Be James Baldwin," Intellectual Digest (July 1972), 68.

[12] Mary Fair Burks, "Social Protest in Baldwin's If Beale Street Could Talk," Black American Literature Forum, 10 (Fall 1976), 87.

[13] Robert Giammanco, "Introduction" to Black Voices from Prison, ed. Etheridge Knight (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), p. 13. Also relevant is Knight's observation that "from the time the first of our fathers were bound and shackled and herded into the dark hold of a 'Christian' slave-ship--right up to the present day, the whole experience of the black man in America can be summed up in one word--prison" (p. 5).

[14] Trudier Harris, "The Eye as Weapon in If Beale Street Could Talk," MELUS, 6 (1976), 66.

[15] William Edward Farrison argues that "Hunt commits suicide because the dishonesty to which he resorted in the efforts to raise the bond money caused him to lose his job. His loss of his job, however, is hardly convincing motivation for his suicide." Farrison's commentary appears in "If Baldwin's Train Has Not Gone," in James Baldwin: A Critical Evaluation, ed. Therman B. O'Daniel (Washington, D.C.: Howard Univ. Press, 1977), p. 79. Farrison's interpretation, however, is a bit too narrow. Baldwin intends for the reader to attribute the suicide to the character's overall sense of helplessness, an overpowering frustration that includes his wife's opposition to his efforts to help liberate their only son.

[16] Pratt argues that the "ending of the novel represents a victory in several respects. . . . The freedom of Tish's baby, the link between present and future generations, has been assured. Although he continues to dwell in a legal limbo, Fonny has been united with Tish and the baby" (p. 80). Cf. Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, James Baldwin (New York: Ungar, 1980), p. 87: "This [the conclusion] is meant, perhaps, to suggest the birth of the baby, or end of Fonny's imprisonment in the future, or both, or something else." Donald Gibson notes that "there is a question as to whether the final scene, which sees the baby born and its unjustly imprisoned father freed, is real, fantasy, or a combination of these" in The Politics of Literary Expression: A Study of Major Black Writers (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood, 1981), p. 119.

[17] Gibson, p. 118.

[18] C.W.E. Bigsby, The Second Black Renaissance: Essays in Black Literature (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood, 1980), p. 108.

[19] Pp. 109, 134.

[20] Alfred Kazin, Bright Book of Life: American Novelists and Storytellers from Hemingway to Mailer (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), pp. 221, 222.

[21] Bigsby, 135.

[22] Farrison, p. 80.

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