FIGHTING THEIR BATTLES, CLAIMING THEIR VICTORIES: THREE EXEMPLARS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMALE HEROISM

by

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Abstract

Fighting Their Battles: Claiming Their Victories: Three Exemplars of African-American Female Heroism

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Three female African-American writers, Toni Morrison, (*Beloved*, 1987); Zora Neale Hurston, *(Their Eyes Were Watching God, 1937)*; and Paule Marshall, *(Praisesong for the Widow, 1983)* create female protagonists whose lives examine the infinite variations and meanings of the slave experience in America. For some, the notion of an African-American female hero is an oxymoron, primarily because the female exists in a milieu which marginalizes her. These writers articulate themes that celebrate the heroic dimensions of their characters who exhibit qualities that are associated with archetypal heroes.

Toni Morrison constructs *Beloved* as a tribute to the strength of a slave mother's love using an authentic human calamity - infanticide - as the basis for her meditation. Morrison transforms the seeming perversion

of maternal values into an exquisite act of love when juxtaposed to the institution of American slavery. Cast as a modern odyssey and containing many parallels with Homer's *Odyssey*, the novel explores the issues of American slavery and the predicament of a slave mother, Sethe, who only wants to love her children. Morrison's protagonist undertakes an odyssey, thus earning the heroic concept of *kleos* - fame enshrined in an oral tradition.

Zora Neale Hurston's novel posits a female protagonist, Janie, who is a prototype of the African-American female hero. Hurston's hero's struggles (like the struggles of the traditional Occidental hero) are as much with the supernatural as with the forces that limit the lives and dreams of women and repress their aspirations. Janie exhibits a tenacity that enables her to chart a course that challenges the patriarchal forces which inhibit and denigrate her desire for self-fulfillment. She embarks on a path to self-discovery, self-valuation, and self-affirmation, a journey to confidence and consciousness.

Paule Marshall's novel, *Praisesong for the Widow*, enacts the creation of an African-American female hero. Marshall inverts the odyssey as a voyage of the adventuresome hero, and constructs a work which can be characterized as anti-epic and anti-odyssey. Marshall's

protagonist, Avey Johnson does not want to undertake an odyssey, and vigorously resists any action - human or supernatural - that will disturb the complacency and lethargy that dominate her life.

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Introduction

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African-Americans' epic experience of slavery can be equated to a descent into a horrifying underworld. It is a *locus classicus* from which the survivors have emerged, psyches damaged but not irreparably, groping for a way to represent the profound knowledge and understanding that to be human in the world is to overcome seemingly insuperable odds. America's "peculiar institution" and its legacy have increasingly been examined and explored by the descendants of the victims of slavery, who having come into literacy, have made an effort to probe the infinite variations and the meanings of the slave experience in the Americas.

African-American writers - *omnes ad unum* - examine, whether cursorily or meticulously, the meaning of slavery from the perspectives of the insiders and seek to extract from it some affirmation of their existence in the world. In the process, many African-American writers construct heroes and characters who reflect and value their experiences in America. African-American female writers, in particular, fashion protagonists who reflect their creators' efforts to represent the female as an entity in her own right. These authors create "models of

alternatives which reverse the stereotyped version of Black women's lives that history has passed down to us" (Alice Walker cited in *Black Women's Writing*, by Gina Wisker, 1993, 3). As a result, African-American female protagonists often manifest the characteristics that are associated with archetypal heroes even though these protagonists exist in a world that marginalizes them.

Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* (1989) argue that slavery has been the grand inspiration for many canonical American writers (Stowe, Twain, Faulkner, Cather, to name a few) who have meditated on America's "peculiar institution", this nation's "heart of darkness, the historic national sin that no holy water will ever wash away" (vii). A recent work, *The Discourse of Slavery: Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison*, (edited by Carl Plasa and Betty J. Ring, 1994) extends the meditation on slavery to the works of such British writers as Aphra Behn, William Blake, Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte. This work addresses the "problematic of slavery within literary, cultural and political writings", and raises questions on "the problematics of thinking and imaging the unspeakable nature of slavery" both for the oppressed and the oppressors.

The "unspeakable nature of slavery" has profound resonances for European and European-American writers who problematize the slave experience. It is, therefore, not

surprising that the American descendants of African slaves should probe the unspeakable nature of the experience and extrapolate from it some great lesson both for themselves, for their contemporaries, and for future generations. Female African-American writers articulate themes that are singularly African-American and female, themes that celebrate the heroic dimensions of their characters. In the process both the writers and their characters carve out a place in the literary landscape and assert a claim to be the purveyors of their own discourse. These writers extract shards of memory from a fragmented history, and through the power of language reconstruct a mosaic that recovers both the tribulation and the triumph of cultural dislocation. The objective of this dissertation is not to embody what Appiah calls the "Naipaul fallacy," that is, "the post-colonial legacy which requires us to show that [African-American] literature is worthy of study precisely (but only) because it is fundamentally the same as European (or for that matter American) literature" (cited in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey*, vi, 1988).

The writers whose works are analyzed in this dissertation are African-American females who have come to prominence in the past two decades or so, thanks to a burgeoning interest in the works of African-Americans as chroniclers of their own experience in this nation. The texts represent a chronology of the African-American

experience as it evolved from slavery and to freedom. Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved* (1987), has as its protagonist a slave mother who murders one of her children to keep them - both children and mother - from being returned to slavery. Although guilty of murder, Sethe, the distraught slave mother, exemplifies in the ordeal of her life many of the characteristics of the classical hero figure. It seems paradoxical and perhaps "counter-intuitive" to assert the claims of hero for a mother guilty of infanticide. Yet Morrison constructs an indefatigable figure whose life, I assert, is an odyssey with an extraordinary number of parallels to be found in Homer's eponymous work. To a remarkable degree, the protagonist overcomes insuperable obstacles and eventually finds her way home, which is the goal of all odysseys.

Zora Neale Hurston, the second featured author in this dissertation, was born in the closing decade of the nineteenth century, and achieved literary prominence in the period of African-American history known as the Harlem Renaissance. Her rediscovery and reception place her in the same literary history as Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall. Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*(1937), has seen a resurgence in popularity thanks in great part to the writer Alice Walker and to Hurston's biographer Robert E. Hemenway. In a foreword to the biography, *Zora Neale Hurston,* (1977) Walker

remarks: " ... the quality I feel is most characteristic of Zora's work: racial health - a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature *(xii-xiii)*". It is this sense of complexity that I hope to examine in an attempt to establish the protagonist of this novel as another type of the African-American female hero.

Finally, Paule Marshall's novel, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), recognizes and celebrates the female hero in its title. The *praisesong* which the author asserts for the sixty-four year old protagonist affirms the claims not only of gender, but also of maturity. The aged and aging protagonist must fulfill the claims of ancestry and of destiny even at the cost of her middle-class life. Marshall's novel extends the discussion of the slave experience in the Americas to include a Caribbean perspective and to reinforce the notion that "essential and necessary experiences occur on islands" (Jacqueline deWeever, *Mythmaking and Metaphor* 45, 1991). deWeever further points out the pivotal role islands play in literature, including works like Homer's *Odyssey*:

> Places of transformation throughout the history of Western literature, they have acquired an almost numinous quality in the works in which they occur, becoming the sacred place of transformation upward or downward. (deWeever, 45).

The nomenclature used to identify the figures in a text may obscure rather then clarify the identity of the characters. In addressing this issue, Carole Boyce Davies, in *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (1994) points out the importance of "unpacking the terminologies and meanings implicit in terms and identities" (3). Several terminologies that may need clarification include "African-American" and "Black." As Davies points out, the first half of the claimed designation "African-American" is "a term based on another misnaming and an attempt to create a monolithic construction out of a diverse continent of peoples, cultures, nations and experiences" (9). However, the term is significant as it identifies that which is not European. African-Americans, as a consequence, have embraced the identification implicit in the name, emphasizing as it does the African roots of our genesis, the "American" part an addendum with political implications. Some of these implications include the notion that having been transplanted to enrich this nation, the descendants of enslaved people claim the rights and perquisites of nationhood and citizenship.

By contrast, the term "Black," as Davies explains, emerged out of the Black Power movements in the U. S. A. and the U. K., the English-speaking Caribbean, and South Africa during the 1960s and 1970s (5). At that time she adds:

> There was ... a political imperative to articulate African existences in relation to White/Anglo cultures ... In most contexts, the term "black" resonated unabashed acceptance of African identity located in history and culture ("blackness") as powerful or as beautiful in a world of cloying, annihilating whiteness. (5)

Black was deliberately removed from its moorings in pathology and inferiority and located in power as the Stokeley Carmichael and Charles Hamilton work *Black Power* (1981) indicates. Blackness, then articulates a resistance to domination and oppression.

The use of the term "female hero" is used in this study instead of the designation "heroine." The term "female hero" is predicated on the notion that the male figures are so designated because they are perceived as illustrious even if they fail in their heroic pursuits. In discussing the variations in nomenclature as they relate to the hero figure, Nadya Aisenberg (*Ordinary Heroines*, 1994) points out that the labels "hero" and "heroine" are hierarchical, designating in fact the heroine's lack of stature (15); Aisenberg, however, opts for the label "heroine" even though the suffix '-ine' denotes a diminutive and the word itself emerges from the masculine noun, suggesting that the heroine is as best "the simulacrum of someone male" and incapable of being the hero's equal (15). Aisenberg's choice of the label

"heroine" is grounded in the view that "we possess neither an archetypal heroine to set beside the archetypal hero nor a female narrative that commands the same instant recognition as the Oedipus story." (16).

The "hero/female hero" is perceived primarily in terms of grandeur and illustriousness, a figure larger than life and incapable of apprehending the ways of ordinary mortals. African-American writers like Morrison, Hurston, and Marshall see the power inherent in inventing characters (whether those characters were fictionalized autobiographies or poetic creations) which refashion the African-American female into a hero figure who achieves both success and failure on a heroic level. Robert E. Hemenway, in his seminal biography of Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (1977), suggests that "Janie's poetic self-realization is inseparable from Zora's concomitant awareness of her cultural situation," and that Hurston's female hero "celebrates the black woman's liberation from a legacy of degradation" (236). Hememway's assertion is equally applicable to Sethe and Avey Johnson, the protagonists in the works of Morrison and Marshall.

The degree to which each of these protagonists succeeds in transforming her "personal and historical memory" (Hemenway 237) into an accomplishment of self-confidence, autonomy, and transcendence, is the degree to which her example can become an instrument of change for

others. These three exemplars of African-American female heroism represent the collective experience of their people. The *locus classicus*, that is the African-American odyssey is often a place of degradation, despair, and death. These female heroes plumb the depths of slavery and patriarchy and oppression in America. They emerge from this devastating experience with heightened awareness of the power of self-knowledge, self-awareness, and self-empowerment in constructing lives that can be lived on a heroic scale.

Chapter 1: Overview of the Literature

The work of men is heralded and adored while that of women is given last place or entirely overlooked ... We must go to the front and take our rightful place; fight our battles claim our victories.

Mary McLeod Bethune

In the world of literature, as in the real world, heroes and the heroic have a central place. Finding that place in the literary galaxy for the African-American female protagonist, whose heroism is inscribed in the literature of African-America, is the essential task of this project. The figures represented and reconstructed as heroic diverge from the traditional model. The female protagonists in the works of Zora Neale Hurston (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 1937), Paule Marshall (*Praisesong for the Widow*, 1983) and Toni Morrison (*Beloved*, 1987) are exemplars of the heroic, although they exist in a milieu in which they are marginalized by the dominant culture in which they live. Despite the barrage of insults and humiliation which daily besieges these figures, they are not morally and spiritually annihilated; instead, wounded, battered, bruised, and defiant, they seek a path which leads to self-valuation. They embark on a journey to confidence and consciousness, a journey that often begins with an escape from physical

and psychological domination, and from diffidence and absence of consciousness.

The construct of the hero is central to any discussion of the novel. In tracing the evolution of the modern novel from ancient Greek romance, M. M. Bakhtin (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 1981) postulates that the human image (the hero/heroine) is a central organizing principle in this genre. The portrayal of the central figures, "however denuded [the] human identity," always maintains "a faith in the indestructible power of man in his struggle with nature and with all inhuman forces" (105). The inhuman forces are not restricted to the supernatural; they may include such pernicious practices as the enslavement of other human beings. Bahktin is careful to point out that *the novel as a whole is conceived as a test of the heroes"* (my emphasis). Embedded in the antecedent to the modern novel is the "compositional-organizing device of testing the heroes," the novel of ordeal *[Prufungsroman]*. The trials of heroes are not limited only to adventures, but more significantly they test qualities of "nobility, courage, strength, fearlessness, and - more rarely their intelligence" (106).

Joseph Campbell's work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1968), while marginal to my project, becomes a point of departure for some female literary theorists whose discourse engages Campbell's paradigm of the hero.

Pearson and Pope in *The Female Hero in British and American Literature* (1981) challenge Campbell's construct of the hero, labelling this figure an "upper-class white male who is empowered socially and politically" (4) and defined by qualities that are characteristically male - machismo, arrogance, dominance - rather than by qualities that are inclusive, human, and transcending gender distinctions. Pearson and Pope argue for a heroic ideal that frees the hero from the limiting assumptions about appropriate male behavior, an important step in defining a truly human and humane pattern of heroic action. The macho hero represents an inadequate and distorted picture of the heroic ideal. The recognition of female heroes is important, not only as a way of affirming women's heritage, but also as a corrective to the male bias implicit in traditional discussions of the hero.

The classic writers on heroes, Frye, Lukacs, Norman, Raglan, among others, identify certain attributes as characteristic of the hero. In these writers' formulations, the hero is generally a male, a patriarchal figure of European ancestry. Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) underscores the power of the hero as a representative of patriarchy when he suggests that:

> ... the ruling social and intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some form of romance where the virtuous heroes and beautiful heroines represent the ideals and the villains

represent the threats to their ascendancy. (186)

An essential element in the hero's struggle is the surrogacy which he represents: "Everything is focused on the conflict between the hero and his enemy and all the reader's values are bound up with the hero" (Frye 187). The hero mediates between the discordant forces of good and evil; his victory is redemptive for his people even if he dies in the process. Hence, as Frye argues, "the hero of romance is analogous to the mythical Messiah or deliverer who comes from an upper world, and his enemy is analogous to the demonic powers of a lower world" (187).. The female hero has no similar expectation and in fact is not perceived as existing in these dimensions. Women traditionally are either the victims, the objects to be rescued, or the trophies awarded to enable the hero to carry out his heroic deeds.

In elucidating the paradigm of the hero, Georg Lukacs, in *The Theory of the Novel* (1971), constructs a more inclusive figure of the hero. In the essay, "The Epic and the Novel," he lays out the defining qualities of the hero:

> The epic individual, the hero of the novel, is the product of estrangement from the outside world. When the world is internally homogeneous, men do not differ qualitatively from one another; there are of course heroes and villains, pious men and criminals, but even the greatest hero is only a head taller

than the mass of his fellows. (66)

This characterization locates the hero in a world of ordinary beings and makes possible the inclusion of figures living in a world whose prestige is predicated on a system other than that of hierarchy and privilege, a world which values them. The estrangement that Lukacs cites is particularly relevant to the African-American female who is isolated not only by race and position, but also by gender. Reworking the paradigm of the voiceless female from the hinterland (bell hooks) creates a powerfully inspiriting force, and locates the female in the sphere of power and agency. Lukacs asserts that the hero is, strictly speaking, never an individual, for the hero's actions, far from being personal, reflect the destiny of a community (66). In this context, then, the hero's adventures resonate into significance for "a great organic life complex - a nation of a family" (67). In the case of the African-American female hero, she becomes the voice from the social and cultural outback and enunciates her demand for inclusion.

Theodore Gross posits that "literary heroes dramatize the moral texture of a country ... they embody the unspoken ideals, the undesired terrors, the dream life, and the mundane existence of their readers" (*The Heroic Ideal in American Literature*, 1971). "Heroes," he asserts, "represent a people, and by discovering the meaning of their character, by returning to the roots of

their behavior, we discern the moral figure in the tapestry of a nation" (*v*). A central panel of the tapestry of the American nation is the one woven by the African-American narrators and interpreters of the African-American experience in America. The threads the writers use in this tapestry are sometimes stained with blood, sometimes tinted by the joys of being human, but always emblematic of the power of the human spirit and the primacy of the written word as a source of representation, reclamation, and inclusion.

The notion that the hero is central to the concept of the novel is challenged by several critics, among whom is Frederic Jameson. Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), shatters Frye's views of romance and of the hero. In interrogating Frye's perspective Jameson argues that romance for Frye is:

> A wish fulfillment or Utopian fantasy which aims at the transfiguration of the world of everyday life in such a way as to restore the conditions of some lost Eden or to anticipate a future realm from which the old mortality and imperfections have been erased.
>
> (110)

Romance becomes, in Frye's delineation, an escape from ordinary reality into a world which *transforms* reality. If, Jameson argues, reality can be transformed through an escape from the humdrum of ordinary life, then ordinary

life must have been conceived, not as a place of "secular contingency and "normal" existence but as the end product of curse and enchantment, black magic and ritual spells." In this formulation, "Romance is staged as the struggle between higher and lower realms, between heaven and hell, or the angels and the demonic and the diabolic" (111). He dismisses Frye's view that "the hero of romance is analogous to the mythical Messiah who comes from an upper world and his enemy is analogous to the demonic powers of a lower" (Frye 187-88).

Jameson questions Frye's notion of characters in the romance - those characterizations of hero and villains as figures in whom cosmic struggles are waged. As representative of cosmic forces, the hero/villain formulation illustrates a transposing of religious myth into a fallen world. Instead of cosmic figures functioning as "emissaries of some upper world," Jameson argues that traditional heroes of Western art-romance:

> Often show a naivete and bewilderment that marks them as rather mortal spectators surprised by supernatural conflict, in which they are unwittingly drawn, reaping the rewards of cosmic victory without ever having been quite aware of what was at stake in the first place. (113)

Jameson suggests that the hero-villain figures are more appropriately designated as *actants,* characters whose imagined lives impinge precariously on each other's.

Citing Frye's own later work, *The Secular Scripture*, (1976), Jameson notes that Frye himself insists on the "essential marginality of the most characteristic protagonists of romance, slaves or women" (Jameson, 113). Frye suggests that "by their necessary recourse to fraud and guile rather than to sheer physical power, they are more closely related to the Trickster than to the Solar Hero" (Jameson, 113). Jameson makes the very important point that the "hero" and the "villain" are more appropriately seen as ethical types about whom the readers make ethical judgments. Yet, as he points out:

> Neither Creon nor Iago can be read as villains without dispersing the tragic force of the plays; yet our irresistible temptation to do so tells us much about the hold of ethical categories on our mental habits. (116)

Jameson's critique of Frye is instructive to my project. His analysis requires a reassessment and redefinition of the terms "hero" and "heroine" in a study whose aim is to reappraise the role and value of the African-American female protagonist/hero in society.

The figure of the Trickster is an important trope in the reading of many African-American texts. The trickster figure, part of the African mythology and a figure known as Esu-Elegbara in the African pantheon, survived transplantation to and fragmentation in the New World. Henry Louis Gates, in *The Signifying Monkey*,

points out that the trickster figure appears with "startling frequency in black mythology in Africa, the Caribbean, and South America," and the United States (4). Gates explains that in the various manifestations of the trickster god, *Esu-Elegbara*, he is "the sole messenger of the gods ... he who interprets the will of the gods to man; he who carries the desires of man to the gods" (6). One important characteristic of Esu is that he carries *ase/logos*, which translated means, "the word as understanding, the word as audible, and later the visible sign of reason" (Gates 7). The trickster figure then becomes a central force in the shaping the language and literature of the New World Africans.

The challenge lies in validating the argument that the juxtaposition of the traditional figure of the hero and the African-American female hero will provide a more complete and accurate paradigm of the hero. Dorothy Norman, in *The Hero: Myth/Image/Symbol* (1969) suggests that:

> The myths of the hero pertain to our most essential struggle with ourselves ... It is the hero in man [and woman] who both reacts most sensitively to challenge, and courageously pays the price for performing whatever deed is necessary to his or our evolution. (12)

Reclamation, representation, and inclusion have been

at the core of the literary tradition of African-Americans. Novels, as artifacts of that tradition, are grounded in living human experience. They reflect the norms and values of the people and the society they portray; they illuminate for the reader what it means to be human in the world circumscribed by the novel. The "hero" figures, both male and female, do not exist outside of time and history. They occupy imaginative time and space (comparable to Anderson's imagined community) located in a cultural context that shapes their ideas, values and roles, and their public and private personae. As products of a given culture, these figures are constructed both to validate and inculcate the temporal, psychic, and spiritual history of the group. They capture the nuances of group identity that are lodged in the core of being human, and are tied to family, place in society and yes, national identity. Through an interplay of values - individual, communal and societal - the protagonist, the hero if you will, establishes attitudes which evince a cultural will to power - a self-conscious attempt to assert a "social act of self-presentation" (Martin 90).

The self-presentation of the African-American, however, is shaped by the identity formed by what some euphemistically call *involuntary transplantation* to America, more candidly, slavery. One essential part of this self-presentation of the African-American hero

contains the individual's "canons of truth for his/her imagined world" (Michael Herzfeld, *The Poetics of Manhood,* 1985, 124). The truth is shaped as much by racial identification as by gender. For the African-American, the truth of his/her imagined world is shaped by the dual divide of race and nationality - in other words, a double consciousness.

Du Bois identifies and describes the paradox and the dilemma inherent in the African-American's double consciousness. He writes in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903):

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, or 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.
>
> (45)

Du Bois's articulation of the African-American's double-consciousness addresses the predicament of the male (as generic of the race) and the tensions with the outside world inherent in double-consciousness. This problem is magnified for the African-American female who is subordinated, and in fact ignored in Du Bois's

representation of the male as generic of the race; thus the African-American female carries the additional burden of non-representation.

When, in 1831, Maria Stewart, an African-American activist, exhorted women to "possess the spirit of independence ... to possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted" (Marilyn Richardson, *Maria Stewart, America's First Black Political Writer,* 1987, 53), she was encouraging an act of self-presentation that was situated in the revolutionary spirit of the founding of the United States of America. Given the dynamics of a slave-holding society and the status of the African-American female in that system, Stewart was urging women to re-invent their images as imaginative constructs of black life. Similarly, Anna Julia Cooper, African-American activist and educator, in arguing for a place for the voice of the "open-eyed but hitherto voiceless Black Woman of America" declared that no man can be "regarded as identical with or representative of the whole." Furthermore, she argued, "while our men seem abreast of the times on almost every subject, they espouse the traditional patriarchal idea that "women may stand on pedestals or live in doll houses, but they must not furrow their brows with thought or attempt to help man tug at the great questions of the world" (*A Voice from the South 1988,* 75). Cooper's arguments seem to bolster the view that

the African-American female is voiceless and oppressed even when she is economically secure; traditionally, the African-American's place is not on a pedestal, but wherever she finds herself she is subordinated.

Cooper's view finds resonance in Anderson's paradigm of the imagined community, as internalizing the values of the representatives of the group. Cooper's voice was among the most compelling advocate for the voiceless black female. Gates points out that it was Cooper who first "analyzed the fallacy of referring to "the Black man" when speaking of black people. She argues that "just as white men cannot speak through the consciousness of black men, neither can black *men* fully and adequately...reproduce the exact Voice of the Black Woman" (Foreword to *A Voice from the South* xiii). In powerful and memorable words Cooper buttresses the black woman's claim to be the purveyor of her own discourse:

> Only the BLACK WOMAN can say when and where I enter, in the quiet undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*.
>
> (31)

Cooper's discourse engages the figure of the female not only as emblematic of the group but also as a transcendent figure in whom resides the capacity to infuse and elevate not only women but men also. Only as

the female's voice is heard, and her claims to full participation in the causes of the race acknowledged, will equity prevail. bell hooks, in *Talking Back*, (1989) reinforces Cooper's argument. hooks writes:

> Feminist thought must continually emphasize the importance of sex, race, and class as factors which together determine the social construction of femaleness, as it has been deeply ingrained in the consciousness of many women ... gender is the sole factor for determining destiny. (23)

The social construction of African-American femaleness has its genesis in the experience of slavery. Following the emancipation from slavery, certain stereotypes of the African-American female were perpetuated to serve the interests of the former slaveholding society. Patricia Hill Collins *(Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 1991) identifies three broad categories that define the African-American female: work and family, sexual exploitation, and the controlling images of mammies and matriarches. These groupings, while they are sociological in their origin, are also applicable to the literary figures whose lives replicate social reality.

Collins postulates that work and family collude in the oppression of the African-American female. She cites

an oft quoted passage from Hurston's, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

> So de white man throw down the load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. (16)

The speaker of these lines, an old woman newly emancipated from slavery, explains the role of women and work in the world in which she exists: women carry the burdens of the world, and it is a task which has no rewards. Implicit in the metaphor of women as mules is the dehumanization and objectification of women. As Collins explains, "As dehumanized objects, mules are living machines and can be treated as part of the scenery" (43). The more dehumanizing the work, the easier it is to envision the worker as the *other* and thus diminish the humanity of the individual. Work defines us all: "Your work, and this goes for white people and black, is what you are ... your work is your life."[1] The work available to African-American women was in the sphere of the domestic, where they were often invisible, or in menial tasks in the field where they

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[1] Byerly (*Hard Times Cotton Mills Girls, 1986, p. 156*), cited in Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 43.

worked alongside men. Speaking on behalf of the oppressed women of her race, the former slave and activist, Sojourner Truth declared:

> That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages or over puddles or gives me the best place
> - and ain't I a woman?
> Look at this arm! I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns and no man could head me
> - and ain't I a woman?
> ... I have borne thirteen children, and seen most of 'em sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me
> - and ain't I a woman? (1851)[2]

In addition to the burden of work, women also have the added responsibility of family. hooks points out that "gender allows black men to travel, makes them Ulysses figures; the burden of race is placed upon women who are grounded" (GSUC Mini-Course on Toni Morrison, February, 1995). Groundedness, the inability to leave an untenable situation, often limits the horizons of women, wrecks

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[2] In *A Miscellany of Women's Wisdom* by Jane Lyle

their hopes, and annihilates their dreams of freedom and autonomy. Typically tied to children and community, fictional black women embark on journeys that are internal, and they seek to define themselves within the enclosed space of the mind. If they are fortunate, they live adventurous lives vicariously through their male children.

Complicating the lives of the African-American female figure is the sexual exploitation she frequently encounters. Motherhood for the African-American female in the slave system as a double-edged sword. Her children were not her children; they were the slave-holder's property which meant that female fecundity was profitable for the slaveowner, adding to his wealth. If, as often occurred, the slave-holder was their father, his status was immaterial to them, for the slave system inverted that traditions of paternal heritage by making offspring from slave women follow the condition of their mothers. Collins points out that "motherhood as an institution occupies a special place in transmitting values to children about their proper place" (50). Generally that place was maintained by inculcating notions of inferiority. On the other hand, some mothers subverted these norms by teaching their slave children "to trust their own self-definition and value

themselves," and imbuing them with the will to resist enslavement.

In addition to sexual exploitation, African-American females were denigrated by stereotypes which depicted them as "mammies, matriarchs, and hot mommas" (Collins 67). Illustrative of the exploitation of the African-American female as the mammy - the faithful, obedient servant - is the figure of the mother, Till, in Willa Cather's novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. In this novel, the slave woman, Till, is uncharacteristically neglectful of her only daughter, Nancy, and is preternaturally concerned with and devoted to satisfying the needs of her invalid mistress, Sapphira Colbert, who depends on Till for her every need. Cather portrays this slave mother as a most devoted servant, but a pathetically and pathologically deficient mother. As Toni Morrison explains in *playing in the dark: whiteness and the literary imagination)*:

> Because Till's loyalty to and responsibility for her mistress is so primary, it never occurs and need not occur to Sapphira that Till might be hurt or alarmed by the violence planned for her only child. That assumption is based on the another - that slave women are not mothers - that slave women are "natally dead," with no obligations to their offspring or their own parents. (21)

African-American women who image the mammy figure are non-threatening as they are perceived as non-sexual beings. Hazel Carby suggests that the objective of stereotypes is "not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations."[3] Where the African-American female is concerned, these social relations function to keep her in her place. Collins comments that "these controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life" (68).

The distorted views implicit in such stereotypes as the matriarch are designed to enclose the African-American female in a space that is claustrophobic, and to limit her participation in those experiences that enhance the female consciousness. Collins observes that there is an interdependence of consciousness and experience. Through a type of internal symbiosis, experience can transform consciousness, and in mutual dependence, consciousness can enhance experience (26). A recognition of the heroic experiences of the African-American female can transform the stereotype into a figure of power and agency.

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[3] Cited in Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 68.

The perpetuation of the image of the African-American female as controlling matriarch supports and explains "the Black women's placement in interlocking systems of race, gender and class oppression" (Collins 73). In her role as matriarch, as head of the family in a society that is portrayed as traditionally patriarchal, the African-American female whether in literature or in society is perceived as subversive. Her dominance in the family structure results in dysfunction and chaos and subverts patriarchal order. In assessing the roles of mammies and matriarchs in American culture, Collins suggests that, "In essence, African-American women who must work are labeled mammies, then are stigmatized again as matriarchs for being strong figures in their homes" (75). One mode of transcending the limitations of these images is to co-opt and transform them by creating protagonists of figures who redefine the denigrated images with figures that reify a new and powerful self-definition. The newly created figures/protagonists must reflect new and positive images that affirm and celebrate their womanhood. A representation of the African-American female protagonists must include characters whose lives reflect their strengths as well as their redefinitions of themselves.

A revision of the determining factors of gender is central to Nadya Aisenberg's work, *Ordinary Heroines: Transforming the Male Myth,* 1994). Aisenberg explores

the issue of the exclusively male myth of the hero. She uses "literature as the instrument for calibrating women's position, since literature simultaneously reflects and forecasts the social world to which it is inextricably linked" (11). This is a very useful distinction as it identifies the central role of women authors as purveyors of their own discourse. Aisenberg's analysis centers on "transforming the male myth" and on constructing a new heroine whose story, influenced by "time, race class and region" confers on her a special kind of moral authority derived from social conscience and awareness" (17-18).

Aisenberg's search for a new paradigm explores the degree to which women are confined in a domestic space which circumscribes their function as self-defining beings. She contends that, "The ancient and charged sexual and social definitions of woman/space hallow inequality and prevailing gender hierarchy" (61). This argument has considerable resonance when contextualized as an examination of the place and space of the African-American female in the American literary tradition. The African-American female figure is an outsider not only in male texts, but also in female texts that reflect America's preoccupation with race. In subsequent chapters Aisenberg examines "the literary and visual representations and the values that arise from them" (64) in shaping not only the ways patriarchy views women, but

also the extent to which women become complicit in perpetuating male dominance. The issues raised here are very powerful ones and have residual usefulness in analyzing the degree to which women collaborate in their own oppression. However, the "spirit, sorority, and sense" which are the focus of one chapter of Aisenberg's text do not extend to the African-American female.

The exclusion of African-American female protagonists from the discussion on heroes presupposes that they are not heroic, and that their lives are not perceived as worthy of discussion, let alone inclusion in the canon which celebrates female heroism. Pearson and Pope, whose work, *The Female Hero in American and British Literature*, is the catalyst for my own exploration of the role of the female hero in African-American literature, suggest that "until the heroic experiences of all people - racial minorities and the poor, as well as women - have been thoroughly explored, the myth of the hero will always be incomplete and inaccurate" (5). However, while Pearson and Pope acknowledge the need for exploration of the heroic experiences of other groups, their work is limited to female British and European-American writers.

Jacqueline deWeever, in *Mythmaking and Metaphor in Black Women's Fiction*, seeks to open the closed books of African and American mythologies (7) and to re-establish the centrality of new and reconstructed myths in the works of African-American women writers. deWeever

acknowledges the centrality of the Greek tradition in the myths of Europe and Asia as a source of prior text, that is intertextuality, in the works of both American and African-American writers. Her focus, however, is on locating and codifying the residual archetypal African myths - particularly those from West Africa - that survived the infamous Middle Passage and that have been reclaimed and incorporated in the works of female African-American writers.

deWeever discusses the presence of myths of the Dahomean and Yoruba pantheon in the works, identifies themes and figures that emanate from the West African pantheon, and enumerates the ways in which these are transformed to accommodate the needs of writers seeking to embrace and reconstruct a lost heritage. She discusses the plethora of chthonic metaphors that pervade the works of the writers she examines. She suggests that "images of creatures of the earth generally appear at turning points in the lives of characters, as metaphors for change in the psyche" (88). This analysis provides a framework for scrutinizing some of the events in Morrison's work. Most important in deWeever's analysis is the assertion that "women are connected to the earth, its creatures, its functions...[and] the use of images and metaphors connected is shown to be indispensable for the explorations of the theme of psychological growth." deWeever's analysis contends that myths are the *sine qua*

non of culture. In such a case, it is requisite that writers who articulate the experience of African-American women explore and use myths as a source of grounding and celebrating the African-American female experience.

Entering the discussion from a different perspective, Hazel Carby disavows criticism that would look at the novel, particularly the African-American novel, only in terms of itself or in terms of trans-historical paradigms. Carby, in an essay, "Ideologies of Black Folk: The Historical Novel of Slavery," *(Slavery and the Literary Imagination)*, suggests, as Jameson does, that there is some "absolute horizon" (Jameson's phrase) **outside** the novel against which to read the work. By insisting on history, both at the time of the novel's composition and of its reception, Carby suggests that the African-American novelistic tradition and canon, from Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, (1982) are dominated by an "ideology of the 'folk' [derived] from fictional representations of share-cropping." (126). The attempt by slaves to construct their "self-hood" and "humanity" through the text of the slave-narrative, establishes the ex-slave consciousness as an original folk consciousness (126). A process of mythologizing the rural South "conflates the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and two very distinct modes of production, slavery and sharecropping, into one mythical rural folk existence" (127). This focus on the

rural excludes the urban experiences particularly those that have emerged through migration from the South to the North. Carby's views demand a critique of the novel other than through the figure of the hero.

In a more recent essay, "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston," (*History & Memory in African-American Culture*), Carby revisits the theme of the folk in Hurston's works. Commenting on the co-opting of Hurston as a veritable industry[4], Carby questions the solidity and the stability of the presence of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in Academe which has established Hurston as a cultural icon. Carby questions whether "the current fascination of the culture industry for the cultural production of black women parallels the white fascination for African-American peoples as representative of the exotic and the primitive in the twenties" (29). Carby argues that intellectuals who appropriate the black folk theme as a locus for their literary efforts are elitists, removed socially and culturally from the folk whose lives and experiences they seek to raise to the level of high culture (32). Of Hurston's work, on the other hand, she writes:

> The rural black folk became an aesthetic principle,

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[4] The new Harper-Collins edition of *Their Eyes* sold its total print run of 75,000 in less than a month.

> a means by which to embody a rich oral culture. Hurston's representation of the folk is not only a discursive displacement of the historical and cultural transformations of the migration but is is also a creation of a folk who are outside of history. (32)

Looked at as history, Carby's argument seems unassailable; however, looked at as literature, the apparent displacement becomes an imaginative space for inscribing and empowering a type of the African-American female. The folk who are the subject of Hurston's anthropological studies and of her novel are subject to transformation and reinvention to "transmit an Afrocentric wholeness in our heritage" (Melvin Dixon: "The Black Writer's Use of Memory," *History & Memory in African-American Culture*, 1994, 19). Part of that wholeness includes the articulation of themes that are singularly African-American and female.

Enslaved African-Americans, denied the unifying power of novel and newspaper, found common cause and shared community even on the plantations. Although their geographic location was circumscribed, slaves imagined themselves a community. Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities* (1991), explains that the ways in which a community's shared consciousness accrues, ultimately manifests itself in that community's literature. He points out that the solidity of community is achieved as

we see the "national imagination at work in the movement of a solitary hero through a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside" (30). While slaves on a plantation could not be regarded as a nation, their social and racial isolation gave them the separateness which made them cohere in many ways. Thus when a group of slaves gathered in the woods to share their mutual pain and agonies deriving from their status as slaves, their songs proclaimed their despair. Slave songs such as "'I found grace in de wilderness,' developed an image of the wilderness as an autonomous terrain, a region preferable to the plantation" (Dixon, *Ride out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature*, 1987, 18).

In Anderson's paradigm, the anonymous slaves on plantations throughout the slave-states, as they articulated their depression and despair, became part of an imagined community of shared experience and longing even though they did not know each other. As Dixon points out:

> The spirituals offer three distinct places of alternative refuge where new identities could be found: the wilderness, the lonesome valley, and the mountaintop ... [Furthermore] the spirituals examine acts that bring about conversion or create a new identity (*walking* the lonesome valley, *singing* with

> a sword in the hand); they are acts of language that initiate performances of freedom in alternative spaces of refuge. (20)

Anderson concludes: "fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating the remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations" (36).

African-Americans inhabit a nation which initially denied them membership in the human race and the benefits accruing to the humanity defined in the American nation; simultaneously African-Americans belonged to a "nation" within the nation defined by race. In Anderson's paradigm, the notion of *simultaneity* takes on bizarre dimensions and clarifies Du Bois idea of warring ideals, divided loyalties. African-Americans, mandated to live illiterate in a literate society in which both the secular and the religious literati conspire to deny them the power of expression, are obliged to live peripherally in an amorphous time zone where the vehicles for transmitting shared experience are forbidden. So the experiences of fixity that should shape their world are ever fluctuating, unable to be grounded in "the hypnotic confirmation of the solidity of a single community" (Anderson 27). Viewed through the notion of the imagined community, two major ideas can be extrapolated from the foregoing. The first is the shared idea of experience; the other is an emerging commonality of experience which

is the basis of a nation. Refracted through the prism of analysis, these ideas of imagined community elucidate Du Bois's view of double consciousness - the notion that the earliest African-Americans and their descendants viewed their world in fragments defined by race and well as by nationality.

Ralph Ellison, in *Invisible Man* warns that history is analogous to a boomerang. History swoops. It *boomerangs* (244). Ellison's caution is instructive, particularly to those African-American writers who extrapolate from the many layers of history, the experiences that have shaped the African-American people. History is multi-layered, and pervading its many layers are *lieux de memoire,* sites of memory. Toni Morrison in an essay, "The Site of Memory," has argued that the African-American writer of fiction has an enormous responsibility to history, a responsibility to "rip the veil" that has shrouded the facts of the African-American experience in the New World. Lifting the veil on the experience of the African-American female and reinterpreting it in literature should reveal the sustaining power of the female imagination even in the midst of her own holocaust (bell hooks). The unveiling should be galvanized by the imagination, for "the act of imagination is bound up with memory."[5]

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5 Cited in the introduction to *History & Memory in African-American Culture*, edited by Genevieve Fabre & Robert O'Meally.

Memory, however, can be notoriously unreliable, highly selective, and extremely egocentric. And yet, as Karen Fields points out in an essay, "What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly," *(History & Memory in African-American Culture)*, " ... memory also succeeds. It succeeds enormously and profoundly; for it is fundamental to human life, not to say synonymous with it" (150). Nonetheless, what one remembers is shaped by social experiences. These are inculcated either through an "unjust etiquette of domination" that is either racially or sexually derived, or through and educational structure that fights a "continuous guerilla war" (160). Fields continues:

> ... education is about what we agree the young should carry in their minds: what schoolbook lessons they should receive, about where they stand in the world and what that world is made of ...
>
> (160-161)

Another kind of memory is that transmitted through vernacular culture, inculcated by the stories that have been passed as part of the collective experience of the the family, the community, the race. O'Meally suggests that "the vernacular [is not] a romanticized or ideological construct. Rather, it is the inversive and inventive edge of African-American culture, constantly in search of new forms" (250). The vernacular form about which O'Meally is writing is located in black social dances and music. However, the vernacular culture is

used in Ellison's writing, (as it used by other writers) to put "naive protagonists in touch with the surging power of vernacular culture" (250). The vernacular culture is analogous to what Carby identifies as the "folk."

In a compelling and engaging analysis entitled, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire"[6], Pierre Nora asserts that there are "*lieux de memoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de memoire*, real environments of memory" (284). He explains that our interest in *lieux de memoire* emanates from a given historical moment:

> Consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn - but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. (254)

Applied to the African-American experience, the sites of memory are located in a past that has been ruptured not only by the dehumanizing experience of slavery - experiences that often demanded a kind of cultural amnesia - but also by transplantation to a culture in which the normal forms of expression that reify and celebrate culture were often sent underground. The consequence is:

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6 Translated by Marc Roudebush

> an integrated, dictatorial memory - unself-conscious [sic], commanding, all-powerful, spontaneously actualizing, a memory without a past that ceaselessly reinvents tradition, linking the history of its ancestors to the undifferentiated time of heroes, origins, and myth - and on the other hand, our memory, nothing more in fact than sifted and sorted historical traces. (255)

This view can be read as a variation of Du Bois's celebrated double consciousness, but one located in a search for connectedness, a search for rootedness in an increasingly ephemeral past whose memories seem simultaneously tenebrous yet palpable. The past is juxtaposed with a present that is unstable and which must be buttressed to enable an oppressed group to use its experiences to see things differently (Collins 26).

Seeing things differently is central to the mission of the African-American female writer and her protagonist. The presentation of the female not only as representative of the group, but also as paradigmatic of the hero figure restores wholeness, a wholeness seemingly inexorably fractured by the experiences of New World slavery and gender oppression. A consonance between the clash of ideology which perceives the female as devalued and the female's own vision of herself and her repressed aspirations is central to reconstructing African-American womanhood (to borrow Carby's title). In liberating

herself, the female hero liberates her group, whether kin, village, or island and in the process becomes representative of the whole race.

Implicit in the process of liberation is the primary act of self-recovery. As bell hooks, *(Talking Back: thinking feminist, thinking black)*, sees it, self-recovery insists on a restoration of the self that existed prior to exploitation and oppression:

> A wholeness of being - named here the self - is present, possible ... and if it was true for the oppressed, the dominated, that the conditions for whole existed, that the whole self existed prior to exploitation and oppression, a self that indeed could be restored and recovered. (30)

hooks locates the act of recovery in her personal experience, but her views transcend the personal and are paradigmatic of the experiences of African-American women in the United States of America.

In *The Politics of Modernism*, Raymond Williams discusses the pre-occupation of the post-modernists with "rewriting the past." He expresses the hope that the next step would be a leap into "a modern future in which community may be imagined again" (35). Taking a leap into this modern future and transcending the modernist *idee fixe* on alienation and nihilism will enable female writers to envisage a new female protagonist. The type of protagonist, in order to "to recover her wholeness,"

must explore paths of self-discovery and immersion in "memory structures" that inhere in the community and that lead to self-modification and liberation.

Chapter 2: Negotiating the Minefields of Memory

nothing matters but the quality
of the affection-
in the end--that has carved the trace in the
mind

Ezra Pound - The Pisan Cantos (LXXVI 35)

What thou lovest well remains,
the rest is dross
What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from
thee
What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage

Ibid. (LXXXI, 98-99)

The horrors of slavery, the pitfalls of love and memory, and the recovery of ancestry are the central themes in Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*. Through the chief character, a slave mother, Morrison explores female heroism, using slavery as a venue. The novel is a modern odyssey in which the protagonist and hero, Sethe, after many circuitous wanderings, seeks a way home - physically, psychically, and spiritually. Morrison, as an African American writer, has re-conceptualized the role of the black female hero, and has refashioned her into a paradigm which exemplifies the primacy of resistance, the power of memory, and the seeming futility of emotional attachment.

Morrison probes the potential of a mother's love which is symbolized most passionately and incongruously in slavery, an institution that ripped families apart and discouraged the natural bond between mother and child.

Beloved is a meditation on the sustaining power and the pitfalls of maternal love and the paradox of escape. The narrative functions as a figurative escape, a narrative of vindication in which escape is as much emotional and psychological as it is physical. Morrison's novel has its genesis in historical events. In January 1856, Maragaret Garner, an escaped slave caused a considerable stir in Cincinnati, Ohio, when she attempted to kill all her children to evade recapture but succeeded in killing only one. F. S. Bassett of Fairmount Theological Seminary in Cincinnati reported in *The American Baptist* his visit to see the unfortunate mother:

> She told the story of her wrongs ... of her days of suffering, of her nights of unmitigated toil. As I listened to the facts, and witnessed the agony depicted in her countenance, I could not but exclaim, Oh, how terrible is irresponsible power, when exercised over intelligent beings! She alludes to the child that she killed as being free from all trouble and sorrow, with a degree of satisfaction that almost chills the blood in one's veins; yet she evidently possesses all the passionate tenderness of a mother's love.
>
> *The Black Book* (10)

Morrison constructs *Beloved*, as a tribute to the strength of a mother's love using the authentic details of a human calamity as the basis for her meditation.

Morrison transforms the details of a seeming perversion of values into an odyssey, conferring on the protagonist in the process, the heroic concept of "*kleos*" - fame enshrined in an oral tradition (Martin 105). To elucidate her construct of an epic using a slave as the central figure, Morrison fashions as a hero figure, a slave mother who is in large measure powerless to control her external environment. Morrison has not eschewed the form of the traditional African-American slave narrative. Instead, she fuses this genre with the epic; both serve each other symbiotically. Morrison constructs *Beloved* as a testament to, and a meditation on the strength, power, and endurance of a slave mother's love. Cast as a modern odyssey in which the protagonist, Sethe, seeks a way home, the novel explores the issues of American slavery, its impact on the protagonist and on the other characters in the novel - both the enslavers and the enslaved.

In fictionalizing and mythologizing the slave mother Margaret Garner and her dead child, Morrison immortalizes both the participants and the event. Morrison uses a story with the generic elements of the slave narrative and transforms it into a saga which recombines notions of "great and heroic deeds," and elements of tragedy, to elucidate the power of love and the power of memory. In resurrecting the historical figure of the slave mother and her dead child, Morrison bestows glory, not only on

the immediate participants, but also on those who would or did undertake similar exploits. Morrison's 'praise' of "[this] exploit ... resembles a poetic eulogy of a heroic deed from the past" (Martin 109). Commenting on the power and resonance of Margaret Garner's actions, the Unitarian minister, Ephraim Peabody of Boston, noting the potential of the slave experience in America for great literature wrote, "We know not where one who wishes to write a modern Odyssey could find a better subject that the adventures of a fugitive slave." (McDowell and Rampersad, viii-ix).

Morrison's novel examines the meaning of infanticide - a seeming perversion of values - as an exquisite act of maternal love when juxtaposed to a system of slavery in which mothers, fathers, and their children have no recognized legal and familial claim to each other. Morrison examines the claim of maternal love that articulates itself in the murder of a child. Jane Campbell points out that:

> Writers insist on heroism, even when such heroism seems inaccessible in everyday life. That mythic transcendence has continually preoccupied black men and women wishing to convey historical truths should not be surprising, given black literature's serious purposes, among them the countering of the dehumanizing images imposed for generations.
>
> (*Mythic Black Fiction*, ix)

Morrison's novel, "parodies other genres", in this case the epic, "re-formulating and re-accentuating," in essence "novelizing" (Bakhtin 5) some of the elements that are peculiar to that genre. Morrison employs the generic elements of the slave narrative and transforms them into a work with strong overtones of an epic, the center of which is the power of love and the power of memory. Using slavery as a leitmotif, Morrison explores the potential of a mother's love which is exemplified most passionately and incongruously in slavery, an institution that ripped families apart and discouraged the natural bond between mother and child. Motherhood and the institution of slavery are linked, a task that is achieved through the process of mythologizing the incident of Margaret Garner's murder of her child, and through the creation of a protagonist who through her epic experiences are paradigmatic of a classical hero figure.

The form of the epic, according to Aristotle begins *in medias res* (in the middle of the action). Morrison's *Beloved* exemplifies this dictum as the form of her novel opens in classical epic tradition *in medias res*. The opening events locate the protagonist, Sethe, in the year 1873, at 124 Bluestone Road in the midst of a losing 'battle' against the spirit of the dead child murdered in the events of 1855. Thus at the outset of the novel

Morrison has "novelized" the epic beginning to serve the purpose of her story.

In *Beloved*, Sethe, the central figure, although toughened by the experience of slavery, retains an inherent dignity. She is:

> A quiet, queenly woman ... the one who never looked away, who when a man got stomped to death by a mare right in front of Sawyer's restaurant did not look away ... And when the baby's spirit slammed [a dog] into the wall hard enough to break his legs and dislocate his eyes ... had not looked away. (12)

Not too many women, or men for that matter could stomach this kind of violence and brutality. In addition, she has incredible physical endurance as exemplified by Paul D's dismay that, "He could not say to this woman who did not squint in the wind, 'I am not a man'" (128).

The protagonist Sethe, like all heroes, faces her struggles alone, but with phenomenal courage. She endures physical and psychological bondage, but displays almost superhuman courage to match the other-worldly forces that challenge and threaten to destroy her. She faces not just daily barrages of insults and humiliations that that would overwhelm and annihilate lesser beings, but the menace of a slave system that devalues her humanity, marginalizes her as social outcast, and most brutally, relegates her to the status of chattel. Abandoned, either by literal death or by the loss of

relatives to the imperatives of the marketplace and the auction block, Sethe - "the quiet, queenly woman...the one with iron eyes and backbone to match" has chosen the more onerous path of life and survival, the way of the hero.

As a mother, a female slave's powerlessness is exacerbated by the inability to control the environment of her children. In killing her child, Sethe doesn't seek to control her environment, but that of her child and in so doing asserts her rights as a mother. She serves as proof that the invididual has the power to control the internal working of the mind and spirit even under the most repressive conditions. What distinguishes the 'hero' of Morrison's novel *Beloved* is that the protagonist has murdered one of her children. Morrison's focus is not on a linear account of Sethe's escape from slavery to freedom. Instead, Morrison seems to incarcerate her protagonist in a metaphysical prison, for while the protagonist escapes physically, she does not escape emotionally and psychically. There are questions and imponderables that trouble the survivors and the dead so persistently that the dead confront the living in an attempt to elicit a justification for the infanticide.

The "miraculous resurrection of Beloved" is the pivotal event in the novel for it invokes the claim to memory and history. Ever present, until Paul D drove her

away, was the unappeased, unexpiated ghost of the murdered child who now returns to confront the mother who took away her life. Through this reversal of the classical trope of the descent into the Underworld, the inevitable journey of the hero to the domain of the supernatural and the other-worldly, Morrison examines the twin legacies of slavery - the throttling of memory and the annihilation of history. Using the presence of the ghost of the murdered child, Morrison reappropriates the past through "the irony of memory associations and continuous haunting" (Dixon, "The Black Writer's Use of Memory" 23).

Morrison transforms a slave's narrative into an epic exploit by incorporating into it the leitmotif of the quest and the trope of the descent that are central to classical tradition of the epic. She introduces an unconventional element - the reversal of the trope of the descent into the Underworld where, in the classical tradition, heroes reunite with ancestral figures and acquire important knowledge. Instead of having her hero descending into a prototype of the Underworld, Morrison has the Underworld come to her protagonist. She refashions this trope of *descent* into an *ascent* from the Underworld of a figure whose return begins the harrowing process of the hero's quest for self-recovery and expiation from the menace and the repercussions of a "too-thick love", but not before a climacterical battle

is fought between the contestants. Their arsenal, on Sethe's side, ranges from guilt to accommodation of all desires, and on the part of the aggrieved child, Beloved, includes all the nuances of guilt, capriciousness, and capitulation that she can muster.

Morrison devises the ascent from the Underworld and constructs it around the carnival which is visiting the town. The carnival is an appropriate environment for the abnormal, the grotesque, and the paranormal - a giant dancing with a midget, a two-headed man. It was a locale where the blacks in town could see the unusual:

> White-people loose: doing magic, clowning, without heads, or with two heads, twenty feet tall or two feet tall, weighing a ton, completely tatooed, eatin glass, swallowing fire, spitting ribbons, twisting into knots, forming pyramids, playing with snakes and beating each other up. (47-48)

Furthermore, Morrison's inverts the meaning inherent in the etymology of the word "carnival" which means "farewell to the flesh" and orchestrates instead a return to the flesh, in the resurrection from the dead of the murdered child.

The scene which anticipates the return of the ghost child presages death and the Underworld by the preponderance of words and images of death, and by the distortion of reality in nature, which are the *sine qua non* of the world of the carnival. Suspension of reality

transfers even to the relationship of blacks and whites for the duration of their visit to the carnival grounds: "Two pennies and an insult were well spent if it meant the spectacle of whitefolks making a spectacle of themselves" (48). Paul D, Sethe, and Denver are dressed in their best for this is a special occasion. Overshadowing the three people prepared for a day of pleasure is an ominous landscape of which they are an integral part. The three people are not presented as animated human beings "holding hands; instead their *shadows* were hand-holding *shadows*. Overhead are *crows*, figurative auguries at which the three humans yelled back as the *crows* cawed overhead. (In classical Greek and Roman culture, auguries were commonly performed by inspecting the flight of birds). The presence of crows, birds which are evocative of death, creates an atmosphere of gloom. The movement from earth to sky forms an enclosure featuring the three human beings in the landscape. Surrounding the humans and lending their portent to this scene, are *doomed roses*. "The *old roses were dying; the closer the roses got to dying the louder their scent; everybody who attended the carnival associated it with the stench of rotten roses*" (47). Paul D is in high spirits which *the smell of dying roses* could not dampen. The images and scent of death accompany the three people to the carnival and and usher them out. On the way home from the festivities of the

carnival, "although leading them now, *the shadows of three people still held hands.*" (47-49) (my emphasis). Emerging from the carnival, then, these three figures are enveloped in an aura of the unreal, of the portentous. They were in the carnival world of the abnormal, the surreal; thus the fusion of the world of the living and the domain of the dead seems less bizarre, and in fact, quite normal. This scene communicates is a presentiment of death and the evocative shadowy other-worldness of the landscape in which these three people find themselves. Thus the reader is not surprised when the mysterious, the inexplicable occurs.

Morrison's eponymous antagonist achieves an ascent from the Underworld following the carnival and the transformation of the living into shadows, into the ephemeral. The carnival as a place of suspended reality becomes the locale at which the three figures can become shadows or shades, insubstantial. The focus on death and shadows becomes a bridge spanning unreality and reality. The notion of the power of the shadows as a transformative force becomes a refrain in the novel: "Right after she (Sethe) saw the shadows holding hands at the side of the road hadn't the picture altered?" (132). Later Sethe reflects on the changes in her life, "a few months of the sun-splashed life that the shadows holding hands promised her; tentative greetings from other coloredpeople in Paul D's company; a bed life for

herself" (173). The shadows are, in one configuration in Sethe's mind, not the three people returning from the carnival but "us three."

> The three holding on to each other skating the night before; the three sipping flavored milk. And since that was so - if her daughter could come back home from the timeless place - certainly her sons could and would come back from wherever they had gone to. (182)

There are echoes here of a trinity, albeit an unconsecrated trinity.

Beloved's emergence follows the shadows holding hands, and is categorised as the "miraculous resurrection of Beloved" in which "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water." (50) Unseen by anyone, she sits by a mulberry for a full day and night, recovering from the exhaustion of her journey. The young woman exhibits infantile characteristics: her neck keeps bending, unable to hold the weight of her head; she has new skin, lineless and smooth hands.

Beloved's return is accompanied by a symbolic birth, a birth that is associated with water. Water is a powerfully evocative image conjuring up images of voyaging and, for African-Americans, that most perilous of voyages, the Transatlantic Middle Passage. Like the earth, the water/the ocean holds many secrets and innumerable untold stories, uncatalogued narratives of

"some dead Negro's grief." As soon as Sethe sees the figure of the young woman slumped against a tree, her bladder empties in a symbolic birth: "the water she voided was endless... it went on and on...But there was no stopping water from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now" (51).

Beloved's emergence from the stream under the bridge marks the beginning of Sethe's quest for reconciliation and expiation as well as a test of her physical and psychological endurance, in essence, a test of the hero. Like Odysseus, Sethe is seeking a way home, a place from which she will run no more. As she proclaims, "No more running - from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took one journey and I paid for the ticket" (15); her ticket, however, is not "stamped paid" because she must endure and surmount the travails of the depredations of the murdered child. Beloved's return has a parallel in *The Odyssey*, reinforcing the heroic element in Morrison's novel and in her protagonist. After Odysseus has spoken at great length with Teiresias, the shade of Odysseus's mother, Antikleia, makes herself known and sorrowfully queries:

> 'Child,
> how could you cross alive into this gloom
> at the world's end - No sight for living eyes;
> great currents run between, desolate waters,
> the Ocean first, where no man goes a journey
> without ship's timber under him.'
>
> XI. ll 173-178

Antikleia's words could appropriately be asked by Sethe. Interestingly, Beloved not Sethe, is the equivalent to Odysseus. The implications are that both Sethe and Beloved are on journeys: Beloved's, however, is more literal. In the Underworld, while Odysseus desires to rekindle the bonds of love that existed in the world, he wonders whether all he is experiencing is a "hallucination sent against him by the iron queen Persephone" (235). Beloved has no such doubts.

Sethe's Underworld is 124 Bluestone Road, and the ghost of her murdered daughter comes to her there. Hers is a house "peopled by the living activity of the dead" (29). Feder suggests that, "In the mind of the Odysseus persona, Hell is ever present; beneath the surface of all his experience its lessons remain (107)." Hell is "also the hideous and frightening depths where human souls endure memories of their crimes" (108). In like manner, for Sethe, a two-fold Hell is ever present - living with the legacy of slavery and its constant reminders - the tree on her back and the memories engraved in her heart and mind. Secondly, she must pacify and indulge the reincarnated child, as well as try to expiate the crime she had committed in the name of love. Hell for Sethe is the double-barrelled assault on her sensibilities, for to coexist with a ghost is to exist in the world of the dead, literal Hell.

The trope of the ascent from the Underworld is the fulcrum on which the novel turns. In classical literature, the descent into the Underworld marks a major turning point in the life of the hero; it opens up a world of past history and reveals and foretells the future. The ascent of Beloved from the world of the dead has a similar function. It becomes a major element in the novel because through satisfying Beloved's need for stories Sethe reconstructs her life and mitigates the forces of memory and history. Beloved returns, and the demands she makes on her mother challenge Sethe and lead her mother to her own epiphany, an inversion of the parent-child relationship that slavery engenders; parents should enable their children's epiphanies.

Beloved's miraculous resurrection becomes a vehicle for revelation and for confrontation and grappling with the horrors and the outrageousness of a world in which the murder of her child, seemed to Sethe preferable to life as a slave. Sethe's life is lived in a series of Hells and not necessarily places of fire and brimstone. One kind of Hell is the plantation on which she lived, Sweet Home rolling itself out in shameless beauty:

> It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. (6)

Another kind of hell is living not merely with the memory of a crime whose justification the victim violently opposes but with the reification of the victim of the crime. This is particularly troublesome when the victim initiates confrontations and seeks impossible answers to acts that cannot be adequately rationalized.

Martin in *The Language of Heroes* asserts that, "Heroes are their own authors, performers in every sense" (90), and as such their performance "must be judged ... as a social act of self-presentation" (90). For Sethe, storytelling becomes a way of presenting herself as mother whose intent is to be an exemplary parent even in the most deplorable circumstances and despite the prevailing value system which dictates that her children were expendable. The self she presents elicits compassionate reaction, as evidenced by the fact that following the murder of her child, she, a woman under accusation, is defended by the Colored Ladies of Ohio and the missionary Bodwins and is ultimately acquitted. The empathy, however, does not extend to Beloved; Sethe's stories fail to pacify her because Beloved cannot reconcile herself to Sethe's infanticide.

To expiate her crime and to achieve a catharsis, the protagonist must demonstrate through story telling that the events of her life led inexorably to the seeming execrable deed. By this means, Sethe "tries to organize the past" (Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les*

Lieux de Memoire, 285) into a cohesive whole. Thus one immediate consequence of the return of the ghost of the murdered child is her insatiable thirst for stories of Sethe's life, a thirst which functions ultimately as an ablution for the storyteller. Beloved's return intitiates a delving into the past by her mother Sethe - the resurrection of the dead daughter requires a retrospective analysis and explanation of the events of the past. This young woman with no lines in her hands, and thus no history, has a voracious appetite for stories with their echoes of pain and loss. The longing in her eyes was "bottomless. Some plea barely in control" (58).

Beyond her longing, however, there are incalculable values implicit in story-telling. The girl who emerges from the water and who comes over a bridge brings with her a limited memory of *her* past and a ravenous appetite for those events that would have comprised her own future had she been allowed to live. She unlocks other memories of the past by using what she knows to jolt the memory of those who have either forgotten or suppressed what they know. One beneficiary of the story telling is Denver who hated her mother's stories unless they were about her. With Beloved's return, Denver begins to ask more probing questions about the events of Sethe's life. In a kind of call and response, Beloved asks a question, and Denver relates the details of the fragmented history of her

mother's life, "constructing out of the strings she had heard all her life a net to hold Beloved" (76).

Beloved's presence creates a fusion of a historic past and reconstruction of the events that created and shaped that past. Andrew Levy points out even though Sethe attempts to assuage Beloved's thirst for stories, "Beloved herself seems not to be listening; or rather, listening with an uncontrollable intensity, uncomprehending everything except that Sethe was the woman who took her face away" ("Telling *Beloved*" 115).

The storytelling, which is a type of battle ground on which the hero fights for absolution, fails to appease the resurrected child because, in Beloved's eyes, Sethe's infanticide cannot be justified. Beloved comes back, not to hear stories, but to exact revenge. The storytelling fails because "storytelling (and its implicit self-justification) as a folk process can debilitate the life of an entire culture, not just the individual for whom the process has failed" (Levy 118). Levy concludes that storytelling fails and the ghost child is exorcised because ultimately "the institutionalized parameters of guilt and responsibility do not provide the vocabulary to "tell," legally or narratively, the anomalies of a slave mother's infanticide" (117). Furthermore, Beloved is a child, so she does not understand what her mother was trying to save her from; just as she can not differentiate glass from diamonds, as evidenced in her

question, she sees slavery as an experience that she was denied rather than an as a fate from which she was saved.

Nevertheless, the stories provide both a rationale for Sethe's actions as well as an indicator of the fragmentation of her life that she has to reconstruct. It is a mark of Sethe's heroic stature that she is a self-made, self-constructed woman who "had nothing to fall back on, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may well have invented herself" (Toni Morrison cited in Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*). Her self-invention begins early in her life for she had no one to show her the way; "You could be lost forever, if there wasn't nobody to show you the way" (135). She had no mother from whom she could learn anything; in fact, thoughts of her mother are so deeply hidden in her memory, that they are recalled only when Beloved, the murdered child, returns and interrogates her, and even here the memories are vague.

In having her hero unearth and recount the seemingly buried story of her mother, Morrison is freeing Sethe to author her own life as well as attempting to repair "the distinct rupture in black family genealogy" that is the consequence of slavery in America (Dixon, "The Black Writer's Use of Memory" in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, 19). In this way, Dixon asserts, "she becomes a metaphor for the way a black woman's story

remains her own" (19). Sethe tells her story in response to her resurrected daughter's need to have a history extrapolated from the past and in response to Denver's necessity to construct a future. Mae G. Henderson, (Toni Morrison's *Beloved: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text")* suggests that, "The connection of Sethe's present with her past is embodied in her relationship with Denver" (93). In telling her mother's story to Beloved, and incidentally, to Denver who is hearing these stories for the first time, Sethe is linking three generations, who would otherwise have been disconnected. Thus the three women represent "the complex and intimate interdependence of past, present, and future" (Henderson 93). Sethe's mother, an emblem of the historical past (whose story we learn about after Beloved's return) carried the brand of "a circle and a cross burned right in the skin under her breast," a brutally visual way of distinguishing this nameless woman from all others, and connecting her to the surviving generation. Under Beloved's prodding, Sethe recalls her mother telling her, "I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark" (61).

Configured a certain way, the circle and the cross are the female symbol, so that through this emblem of the female, Sethe's mother becomes the generic woman survivor, an emblem she passes on to her child in memory.

For Sethe, this emblem (her mother was the only remaining person with that mark; all were dead) represents both truncated historicity, anonymous femaleness as well as a permanent attachment to a mother. In a profoundly unchildlike way, recognizing the importance of imprinting her mother's memory in physical form on her own body, the young child, not wanting to be unidentifiable and thus be forgotten, imprints her mother's face, mark, and words on her mind. The distraught child, not wanting to be unremembered and unrecognized, implores her mother to place the brand on her. In her childish inarticulation of the power of the moment when her mother reveals the identifying brand of the circle and the cross, words fail Sethe:

> All I could think of was how important this was and how I needed to have something important to say back, but I couldn' think of anyything so I just said what I thought. 'Yes, Ma'am,' I said. 'But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me, too,' I said. 'Mark the mark on me too.'
>
> (61)

Her mother's reponse is a slap in the face. The young girl does not know that as a slave child, she follows the condition of her mother. Not until Sethe has her own mark, the chokecherry tree on her back, does she understand her mother's violent reaction. The power of the recollection of her mother who was later hanged

causes "something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind right behind the slap on her face and her circled cross" (61).

The brand Sethe's mother carried on her body not only marks her as the product of a particular culture, but is emblematic of contradictory impulses manifest in the African and the American cultures. In many African societies, scarification is a ritualized mode of identification which marks the individual as a valued member of a particular tribe or clan. In the American slave society, the brand announces the dehumanization of the individual and reinforces her status as outcast. These two currents converge literally and figuratively in the belly of the slave ships, where the transplanted Africans first confront the reality of a society whose wealth and well-being are predicated on slavery and the branding of ownership on the enslaved. Sethe's mother's story is told to the "small girl Sethe" by Nan, a slave woman who had one good arm and half of another; both women survived the perilous Middle Passage crossing as well as rape by the crew and by whites on the plantations. Nan is a connecting link to Africa and Sethe's mother. What Nan told Sethe "she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message was there" (62). The adult Sethe under the impulse of satisfying Beloved's need for

stories "was picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood" (62) and attempting to use residual memory to construct a history. Nora asserts that "the quest for memory is the search for one's history" (289).

Part of Sethe's self-presentation reveals that as an individual she has a distinctive sense of what her life should be. Sethe is not only a motherless child, but she comes of age on a farm where there are no other slave women from whom she could learn how to be a woman.[7] "Wasn't nobody to ask. Mrs. Garner never had no children and we was the only women there" (159). She would have liked to learn, for instance, how the other women made a bunting from which to hang their babies in the trees, or what leaves were curative. She realizes that it is hard being by herself "with no woman to help you get through" (160). This isolation is both liberating and inhibiting. Because there are no other female slaves to teach her the behavior appropriate to a slave, Sethe is relatively free to develop her own ideas and values, largely by trial and error. One example of this is her marriage to Halle, one of the five male slaves on the Garner's plantation. At Sweet Home, Garner the

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[7] In casting her protagonist as an orphan, Morrison is following a received tradition: None of Shakespeare's heroines have mothers; this is also true of the heroines of the ancients.

plantation owner encourages his male slaves to invent ways of doing things...buy a mother, choose a horse or a wife" (125). As a sign of her autonomy, in selecting a husband, Sethe chooses Halle.

Sethe participates explicitly in designing her marriage to Halle, for it establishes that she has choices which are respected by the slave men on the farm. Sethe is chosen by all the brothers on the plantation, but effectively she picks Halle. She "happily agreed and then was stuck not knowing the next step. There should be a ceremony, shouldn't there? A preacher, some dancing, a party, a something." (26). Since she and Mrs. Garner are the only women on the Sweet Home plantation,she seeks her advice. Several things are evident here. First, Sethe chooses to be Halle's wife, and that is significant for it reinforces a strong sense of her ownership of herself, and of her individuality and value as a person. She is not merely mating to be a breeder for Sweet Home to increase the wealth of her owners.

Secondly, she does not see her status as a slave as precluding a ritual and celebration of the marriage. She is Everywoman participating in an ancient and time-honored rite of passage, an occasion that she knows instinctively needs to be recognized and honored. Had there been other female slaves on the Sweet Home plantation they might have jeered her audacity to want a

ritualized wedding. It certainly did not occur to Mrs. Garner that this young slave girl was serious when she asked her mistress, "Is there a wedding?" Mrs. Garner laughs and dismisses the query with a condescending, "You are one sweet child" (26). In addition to being the solitary female slave on the plantation, she was a mere girl just fourteen years old. Nonetheless, she who had never seen a wedding but had seen Mrs Garner's wedding gown in the press, set about constructing a wedding dress, creating a ceremony - "something to say it was right and true" (58). Using her imagination and the limited resources available to her, Sethe made herself a wedding dress from borrowed fabric: two pillow cases made the top, the front of the skirt was a dresser scarf, the back of the skirt was made from the mosquito netting used to strain jelly. Her wedding dress was like her life: She had "to take it apart afterwards and put all the pieces back where they were." (59) She even had a honeymoon: going down to the cornfield with Halle.

Sethe's marriage to Halle is unique, particularly when compared to her mother-in-law's situation. Sethe was married to Halle for all of six years, and he was the father of all her children. Baby Suggs, Halle's aged mother, on the other hand, had eight children by six fathers (23), not because she was immoral, but because she was seen as a breeder whose offspring enhanced the fortunes of her owners. All her children except Halle

were sold away from her. Hers was a world of great instability:

> Men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, stolen or seized. (23)

In part because she had few female mentors, and perhaps out of an obstinacy that set her apart from other women, Sethe did not set parameters on her love for her children. This distinctiveness casts her in the role of hero who in asserting her self-valuation challenges the status quo. Through the person of Paul D, Morrison points out, "For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she has settled on to love" (45). Hooks posits the view that "slave narratives often emphasize time and time again that black people's survival was often determined by their capacity to repress their feelings" (*Sisters of the Yam*, 132). She cites as an example, Frederick Douglass, who as a child had so few and cursory contacts with his mother that her death left him unable to grieve a loss he barely understood. Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, not only runs counter to this tradition, but takes the tradition and inverts and intensifies it and makes the mother love so thick that it murders the thing she loves. Sethe murders her beloved

child because it was the best part of herself (251); the mother has to learn at great cost that she was her own best thing: "You your best thing, Sethe. You are"(273).

The murdered child does not stay dead and her "miraculous resurrection" (105), which invokes her claim to and the need for a reconstruction of her truncated history, is at the heart of the novel. When Beloved asks Sethe, "Where your diamonds?", her mother replies incredulously, What would I be doing with diamonds?" Sethe recalls that she once had some crystals, a wedding gift from Mrs. Garner, a gift she couldn't use, which to the untrained eye or to the deprived, may be as glittering and as valuable as diamonds. This question from Beloved enables Sethe to launch into a story, the telling of which is both joyous and painful, as she discovers the "profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling." (58)

In a complex and fragmentary way, Sethe will recollect and recount events of her own history as well as the history of the slaves at Sweet Home. Lamarque observes that the "complex time frame of narration reflects the fragmentation of history. There is a narrative present and a narrative past bounded, as it were, by the real (or external) present and the real (or external) past." *(Narrative in Culture* 133). The fragmentary mode of Sethe's recollection mirrors the

fragmentation of her experience and the experience of the Sweet Home slaves.

Through the device of satisfying Beloved's need for stories, Sethe reconstructs and authors her own history and the history of the Sweet Home slaves, recalling the events from deep down in the far distant places of the mind. She does this in much the same way that she pieced together her wedding dress from the odds and ends of fabric that she found and borrowed from Mrs. Garner, and "had to take it apart afterwards and put all the pieces back where they were" (59).

Beloved's need for stories empowers her mother to recover the disparate pieces of her life and patch them back together, "remembering something she had forgotten she knew" (61). Beloved's question, "Your woman, she never fix up your hair?", evokes a personal and ritualized occurrence, that of participatory grooming of the hair among African women. It is a gesture of love, caring, and mutuality which forces Sethe to recall the memory of her mother. In recounting her memory of her mother, who is nameless, Sethe evokes a feeling of loss, "She never fixed my hair nor nothing. She didn't even sleep in the same cabin most nights I remember. Too far from the line-up, I guess." But it is the memory of a deeply fissured relationship, one in which the traditions of identification and filial and maternal relationship practiced universally have been perverted in the

imperatives of a slaveholding culture, and one in which the normal maternal bonds have been severed and warped. In referring to her grandmother (Sethe's mother) as "your woman" Beloved reveals a deep sense of disconnection from the maternal bond that would familiarize her with the various relationships that exist among women. She does recognize, however, that there was a bond which made Sethe her mother's dependent, and therefore responsible for her child's grooming.

Bernard Bell ("*Beloved*: A Womanist Neo-Slave Narrative; or Multivocal Remembrances of Things Past") characterizes Sethe's storytelling to satisfy her reincarnated child as "black women's remembrances" of things past - "the terror and horror or the Middle Passage" (10) ... multivocal remembrances of things, past [in which] Morrison probes the awesome will to live of her characters in order to celebrate the truth and resiliency of the complex double consciousness of their humanity" (15). Sethe's resiliency and humanity are severely tested by Schoolteacher who is engaged in anthropological studies of the Sweet Home slaves.

Like the disparate pieces of her life and history which Sethe tries to order into a coherent whole, diverse elements of the narrative are connected into a cohesive whole by elements that are central to epic journey of the hero. After living on Circe's enchanted island, where the enchantress turned Odysseus's men into swine and then

restored them to their human form, Odysseus and his men are anxious to leave the island for his "own well-timbered hall on Ithaka" (X, 1.524). Circe, reluctant to hold the voyager against his will, however, tells him that he must first undertake the journey to the Underworld:

> but home you may not go
> unless you take a strange way round and come
> to the cold homes of Death and pale Persephone.
> You shall hear prophecy from the rapt shade
> of blind Teiresias of Thebes...
>
> X, 543-547

Sethe's descent into the Underworld, like Odysseus's descent, is precipitated by the enchantress, Circe.

In *Beloved*, the Circe figure is Schoolteacher, whose persona has resonances in *The Odyssey*. Like Circe, Schoolteacher precipitates Sethe's flight from the plantation, and is the reason for her journey as well as the events that are the consequence of that journey. Schoolteacher's role in the novel reinforces certain epic and heroic elements that characterize *The Odyssey*. Schoolteacher's role is central in the saga of Sethe as a hero figure, for he is the initiator of the test of the hero. Schoolteacher precipitates Sethe's flight, and sends her on the journey that will test her resiliency and her humanity in unimaginable ways.

As a Circe figure, Schoolteacher is an emblem par excellence of the dehumanizing slave system which figuratively transform human beings into animals.

Schoolteacher's power as a Circe figure lies in the power of the *word* to enchant and transform and reify. As long as the studies that he and his nephews recorded in their books, studies written with the ink that Sethe made are unknown to her, the word had no power to distress. In *How to Do Things with Words*, J. L. Austin underscores the power inherent in words, "CAN SAYING MAKE IT SO?" (7). Austin remarks that:

> It is always necessary that the *circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*, and it is very commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or other persons should *also* perform certain *other* actions, whether 'physical' or 'mental' actions or even acts of uttering further words. (8)

Schoolteacher and his nephews have been carrying out their anthropological studies for an extended period, but as long as the details of these studies are unknown to Sethe, they are powerless to affect her. In addition, as Austin points, out the words must "be spoken 'seriously' and so as to be taken 'seriously'" (9). An extension of this concept is that the words spoken must be believed by the hearers.

The focus of Schoolteacher's anthropological studies is to disprove the humanity of the slaves at Sweet Home, by identifying what he percieves to be their baser

nature. To this end, his nephews are assigned the task of observing, cataloguing, documenting, and differentiating the animal and human characteristics of the Sweet Home slaves. Sethe overhears Schoolteacher admonishing one of his pupils who was "doing" Sethe as his class assignment: "No, No. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal characteristics on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (193). For Sethe, this is the ineluctable point of humiliation[8], and is the impetus that galvanizes her flight. To add more shame to her humiliation, in the background where the scene takes place, Sethe recalls a dog licking out a pan in the yard and flies settling over the face of the infant Beloved. The juxtapostion of this scene with the overwhelming humiliation of being recorded and defined as animal, indubitably reinforces in Sethe the significance of Schoolteacher's studies. To him, she and her children were no different from dogs or flies, a proposition she cannot accept.

When Sethe tries to elicit from Mrs. Garner the meaning of the term "characteristics", Mrs. Garner, seemingly irrelevantly interposes her answer with

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[8] Derek Walcott used this phrase in an address at the Black Writers' Conference held at Medgar Evers College, CUNY, March, 1993.

instructions about the cows. When Sethe scratches her head, Mrs. Garner remarks that washing her hair would rid it of lice, something Sethe rejects out of hand: "Ain't no lice in my head ma'am." (195). Clearly, Mrs. Garner is aware of Schoolteacher's anthropological studies, and seems to share his opinions. Mrs. Garner's response and Sethe's denial represent polarities on the continuum of human dignity; the mistress concurs with her brother-in-law's views which include the dehumanization of the young slave mother who rejects the categorization of being less than human.

Sethe clearly takes seriously the words labelling her bestial. Schoolteacher's assertion of her "bestiality" is reinforced when he and his nephews with their mossy teeth, hold her down in he barn in which unknown to her Halle was hiding. One of the boys holds her down, the other sucks on her breast, while their "book-reading teacher watches and [writes] it up." Sethe's resiliency and humanity are severely tested through the persona of Schoolteacher who is engaged in anthropological studies of the slaves on the Sweet Home plantation.

Schoolteacher is a somewhat nebulous figure, drawn in outline rather than in bold relief, so that he is a powerful emblem rather than a person, highlighted by the fact that he does not have a patronymic. Sethe's description of him is terse: "He was a little man. Short. Always wore a collar, even in the fields" (36).

It is not clear whether or not he was childless, but certainly he had no extant wife; he was Mrs. Garner's "husband's sister's husband" (36). The two young men who accompanied him to Sweet Home are referred to as his nephews, but Sethe was uncertain whether they were his sons of his nephews. He and his nephews/sons have fine manners: "Talked soft and spit in handkerchiefs. Gentle in a lot of ways ... the kind who knew Jesus by His first name, but out of politeness never use it even to His face" (37).

Schoolteacher's anthropological studies are conducted in a visually enchanting setting, Sweet Home. It is a powerfully ironic name, for it is the antithesis of home, and life there is certainly not sweet for the slaves whose labor makes it an Edenic place. Sweet Home is an island in many ways: Mr. Garner treats his slaves like "men" which isolates him from the neighboring slave owners, and is a source of considerable acrimony. On the plantation, Garner's slaves have the freedom of men: they are allowed, encouraged to correct Garner, even defy him. They could handle guns, even learn to read if they wanted to - but they saw no value in reading since nothing important to them could be put down on paper (125). The vaunted freedom on this plantation is illusory, for their choices are circumscribed by the greater reality that they are slaves. This illusion of freedom is more cruel

because powerless men were holding symbols of power and death which they could not use.

The dehumanization of the slaves takes on a particular virulence which goads Sethe to flee the plantation and begin the hero's mandated journey. The slaves at Sweet Home initially misread Schoolteacher's gentle manners and his seemingly innocuous questions, the answers to which he records in his notebook. The questions he asks Sixo change him permanently. Sethe remarks that " ... it was them questions that tore Sixo up. Tore him up for all time" (37). It is a tribute to Sethe's resilience that Schoolteacher's questions rather than destroy her, enable her flight from Sweet Home.

Circe's island is a paradigm for Sweet Home, an efficiently run laboratory to test the limits of the slaves humanity and catalogue their bestiality. Schoolteacher is the Circe who metamorphoses humans into animals. The slave system at Sweet Home is more bestial and more brutal because of the ways in which the male slaves on the plantation are deprived of fulfilling even such basic human needs as sex. The men on the plantation are so starved sexually that they have resorted to sexual intercourse with cows. They are characterized as pseudo-human, "trespassers in the human race. Watchdogs without teeth; steer bulls without horns; gelded workhorses whose neigh and whinny could not be translated into a language responsible humans spoke" (125). In one telling scene,

Paul D has an iron bit in his mouth, the punishment for trying to escape. Like a horse, his lips are yanked back; the tongue is offended, "held down by iron, how the need to spit is so deep you cry for it" (71). It is a punishment that causes a wildness to shoot up in the eye the moment the lips are yanked back (71). With bit in the mouth, Paul D walks by five roosters among fifty hens. One rooster, Mister, seeming more human then the bridled man, sat on a throne-like tub, and smiles at him. Paul D remarks:

> Mister, he looked so ... free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher ... Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. *Schoolteacher changed me.*(my emphasis). I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub (72).

Animals, low on the Great Chain of Being display pride, majesty, assert dominance: Mister could "whup everything in the yard (72). The rooster is a reification of the slave master: "hateful, bloody, evil, smiling contemptuously" (72). Paul D is so overwhelmed by the recollection of the *tableau vivant* with Mister as the centerpiece, that he dehumanizes himself. Where his red heart used to be there now is a tobacco tin buried in

his chest ... the lid rusted shut (72-73). "For years, Paul D believed schoolteacher broke into children what Garner had raised into men" (220).

Many years later after he had finally escaped slavery, Paul D wondered whether Garner was much different from Schoolteacher, for these slave men had been "isolated in a wonderful lie" (221) by Garner when "he announced them men but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not?" (220). The answer is clear that these men were not complicit in their own degradation: Paul D is certain that Halle and Sixo were men whether Garner said so or not. About his own manliness and complicity in his dehumanization, Paul D is less sure, but he is alive to speak deprecatingly about himself, if he chooses, while the other men are dead.

The time set aside for the young men to pursue their studies marks their activities as having great importance. Not only were the activities of great seriousness because of the time devoted to them, but they were recorded in the students' notebooks with the ink that represented part of the economy of the plantation. Furthermore, any errors the students made had to be corrected. Sweet Home and the slaves there are his laboratory, as much as they were Mr. Garner's laboratory. Schoolteacher recognizes that Sethe and the Sweet Home slaves have human characteristics, but these diminish in

the presence of those characteristics that are the focus of his book. What Sethe overhears is his focus on her animal characteristics. Having heard this derogation of her persona into human and animal, with the emphasis on the animal, Sethe is transformed. However, unlike the men at Sweet Home, she asserts the dignity of her humanity, and the nobility of her being.

It is a testament to her humanity and discernment that she understands the power inherent in the written word. She may have been illiterate, but she possesses the technical skill for making the high quality ink that records her perceived animal characteristics. She knows that this derogation of her humanity requires exceptional action. Thus Sethe does not rage at Schoolteacher, neither does she succumb to Schoolteacher's words; instead she develops a plan to escape from Sweet Home. All the events of her life enabled and compelled emotional detachment - separation from her mother early in life, not understanding why anybody's "ma'am would run off and leave her daughter" (203), discovering that her mother died by hanging and that her body was burned afterwards. With no models to nurture and guide her into womanhood and motherhood, Sethe develops her own model, and instead of emotional detachment, cultivates an emotional attachment that would not allow her "to draw breath without her children" (203).

An even more repulsive occurrence, orchestrated by Schoolteacher as part his anthropological studies, identifies him as a figure who metamorphoses his victims and experiments on them for purposes of his studies. As Davies points out:

> The core response of Sethe in *Beloved* is to the appropriation of her milk, and therefore to her reduction to animal status that is entailed in apropriated motherhood (clearly schoolteacher's intent in his research measurings) (144).

The event takes place in the barn about the time Sethe has decided to flee the plantation with another group of escaping slaves. Hidden in the loft awaiting nightfall is Halle, Sethe's husband. Under the tutelage of Schoolteacher, one of his mossy-teethed nephews holds her down, while the other sucks from her breasts the milk she needs to nurture her child. In the interim, Schoolteacher watches and watches and writes it what he observes. This experience has a traumatic effect on Sethe, in part because she is pregnant and is saving the milk for the child who has been sent ahead with a band of fugitive slaves. For another, as she learns much later after Paul D comes to 124 Bluestone Road, Halle was a silent and passive witness to her shame. It is this event that destroys Halle for it violates his manhood to be powerless to intervene to save his wife from a shameful experience, one that is tantamount to a rape.

In addition to being an evil transformer, Schoolteacher projects an aspect of the apocalytic; his pursuit of Sethe alludes to the biblical Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. After Sethe has escaped, Schoolteacher and the three slave-catchers accompanying him evoke images of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalyse: "When the four horsemen came - schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a sheriff" - (148) ride up to 124 Bluestone Road. Schoolteacher had chastised his nephew for mistreating the woman. He viewed Sethe's mistreatment as analogous to to mistreating a horse, or the hounds, the consequence of which is the creature's revenge when the human least expects it:

> You'd be feeding them maybe, holding out a piece of rabbit in your hand, and the animal would revert - bite your hand clean off ... see what happened when you overbeat creatures God had given you the responsibility of. (149-50)

It is clear that Schoolteacher exemplifies the worst evils inherent in a hierarchical structure that gives absolute power of one human being over another. The patriarchal slave system dehumanizes the people it oppresses for the slaves are perceived as on the same level as the cows and the hounds. A fugitive animal must be retrieved not only to discourage others but also to maintain the economic integrity of the farm. Schoolteacher does not for one moment doubt his own

humanity and justifies his position as a right, a fulfullment of his right as master. In the alignment of master/slaves, the masters exhibit the grossest of behaviours. What occurs here is an alliance of two interwoven strands[9]. One strand is the victims of the slave system, the other strand is the victimizer, exemplified by the slave drivers caught up in the tragedy and the brutality of the slave system. The men in the slave coffle are brutalized by the slave drivers, and the slave system evokes the most brutal and inhuman responses in those who are its agents.

Sethe exhibits the emotional detachment that is the hallmark of the hero figure. The traditional hero must be willing to leave home, loved ones, country, and go into the unknown. All the events of her life enabled and compelled emotional detachment - separation from her own mother early in life, the discovery her mother's death by lynching, and the subsequent burning of the corpse, and the absence of models to nurture and guide her into womanhood and motherhood. Mrs. Garner was childless and the remoteness of the Sweet Home plantation precluded

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9 Richard Lattimore, in the Introduction to his translation of *The Iliad of Homer*, remarks that, "Against the tragedy of Achilleus is set the tragedy of Troy, and the two strands are closely involved." (45). I have extended this argument to suggest that the slave drivers themselves are caught up in the tragedy of the slave system.

interactions with other slave women on neighboring estates. Nine months pregnant, she courageously enrolls in the band of slaves fleeing Sweet Home for they know not where, except that it was not on the "bloody side of the Ohio" (31). She delivers one child on her flight, and having escaped and threatened with recapture by Schoolteacher in posse of the four horsemen, kills one child with the intent of killing all three. Even after the murder she is emotionally detached from the flurry of activities to save her life. Mr. Bodwin, the abolitionist, "went to see the judge - in chambers"... The Colored Ladies of Delaware, drew up a petition to keep her from being hanged. "Two white preachers had come round and wanted to pray for [her]" (183). Sethe is emotionally detached from these activities: when Baby Suggs brings her news of the efforts being made on her behalf, she articulates more pressing problems - she needs something for the rats in the prison.

Miriam F. Polster (*Eve's Daughters*, 1992) enumerates a "roster of qualities asccribed to heroes over the ages," the first of which is that "All heroes are motivated by a profound respect for human life" (22). Sethe's murder of her child seems to contradict this characteristic of the hero figure. Polster also suggests that, "Valuing life can also mean preserving the dignity with which a life is to be lived" (23). That the life at

Sweet Home lacked dignity is an understatement. The ultimate indignity Sethe endured was the "milking" like a cow, by School-teacher's nephews, while unknown to her, her husband Halle helplessly watched the affront to his wife. The possibility of a capture and return to Sweet Home where her flight would be severely punished, where the reprisal would include the bit and the sale of her children to unknown and irretrievable places, demanded heroic action. Cornered and powerless, she would seem to recognize "the futility of outsmarting a whiteman and the hopelessness of outrunning a rifle" (148), but as the omniscient narrator reminds, "The very nigger with his head hanging and a little jelly-jar smile on his face could all of a sudden roar, like a bull or some such, and commence to do disbelievable things" (148). Sethe does the "disbelievable" thing.

Sethe's "disbelievable" act has its genesis in a profound self-knowledge that dares to know and dares to accept responsibility for that knowledge, that are a bulwark of heroic action. She knows that her humanity and her children's humanity are violated by Schooteacher and the world he represents. A woman of dignity, she dares to face a certain kind of understanding and acceptance. Sethe accepts that the murdered child haunting the house at 124 Bluestone Road is sad, not evil, is rebuked and lonely, and that the dead child's return and anger are justified. When Denver tearfully

informs the newly-arrived Paul D that she and her mother are ostracized and isolated by the community in which they live, Sethe rejects his idea that they move. When Paul D suggests that her remaining in the haunted house has a deleterious effect on Denver, Sethe quietly and firmly tells him:

> I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arm. No more running - from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D Garner: it cost too much!
>
> (15)

Sethe, in a sense, is declaring that her life is *stamped paid,* and that she accepts her fate and the consequences of her actions. She is, therefore, understanding of the rage of the dead child's ghost. The tree on her back is emblematic of the legacy and the scars of slavery that have shaped her life and can never be eradicated.

Although little more than an unschooled slave girl when she fled Sweet Home, Sethe's knowledge plumbs profound depths of maternal and human understanding. She understood the deadening and demoralizing effect of categorizing the slaves' attributes into human and animal characteristics. With this knowledge she galvanized herself into action that led to further tragedy - the

killing of her child to save it from the death-in-life on the Sweet Home plantation.

Miriam F. Polster asserts that one of the characteristics of heroism is that, "Heroes have a strong sense of personal choice and effectiveness." Sethe's choice is driven by knowledge of the penalty that is prescribed by the culture which nurtures slavery as part of its structure. She would inevitably have lost her children to the slave auction as part of her punishmentfor loving them and wanting to keep her family intact. Her choice was one of administering a loving death at the hands of a mother,or watching a punitive and anger-filled death at the hands of a hated enemy.

Sethe's action in murdering the child generates a considerable degree of empathy. As readers, we may empathize with Sethe because in our unconscious we harbor simultaneously the potential for hostility, for violence, irrationality, and love. Sethe's infanticide evokes comparisons to Medea who, in Euripides' tragedy, *Medea*, slaughters her children. Medea's is motivated by jealousy and revenge at the self-serving Jason who is planning a marriage because, as Medea asserts, "He became enamoured of getting a king for a father-in-law" *(Medea, 1.70)*[10]. Hadas, in the introduction to the text,

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10 *Ten Plays by Euripides*, translated by Moses Hadas and John McLean, with an introduction by Moses Hadas.

Ten Plays by Euripides, comments that "Medea's horrible murders are not if her rights condoned; but she would never have been driven to commit them if her rights as a human being had been recognized in the first place." (xiii). What both women share in common is an effort to "outhurt the hurter" (*Beloved*, 23). In Medea's case, the hurter is her husband, and her motive is revenge, the revenge of a woman scorned, a more personal relationship. Sethe, is not by any means the "woman scorned" - scorn is implicit in her station as a slave. She is motivated by a desire to save her children from the unspeakable horrors of slavery. So she confronts the representatives of a culture whose economic and social structure is predicated not only on the dehumanization of others, but demands the collaboration of those being dehumanized. Sethe resists dehumanization by dispatchin her children to a place that is out of reach of her enslavers.

In classic tradition and in the mode of many heroes, Sethe exemplifies the fatal flaw - *hubris, pride*. Hubris is a powerful internal motivating force. Richmond Lattimore *(Story Patterns in Greek Tragedy)* explains that hubris - known in Greek tragedy by its master-name *hybris* has often been misconstrued and used with different connotations by various Greek writers. He suggests that while *hubris* may have negative connotations - rapacity, sexual lust, in general violence - *hybris* is the

provenance of deities, not of humans. Elsewhere, Ferguson (*A Companion to Greek Tragedy*) points out that in the themes of Aeschylus's tragedies are found:

> the great moral problems at the heart of the universe: in destiny and fatality, working through human will and human passion; ... in the vengeance of the gods on hybris, a term that includes both arrogant pride and immoral violence. (33)

In *Hubris: A Study of Pride*, Robert Payne explores the "history of pride ... the sharp cutting-edge of the self-confronting soul" (1, 3). Hubris, he informs us, is:

> This nymph with the honey-sounding name is the most mysterious of all, for she was to leave upon the people of Greece indelible traces, but of her origin nothing is known. She was to become as great as the gods and more powerful than the most powerful men, yet we know neither where she first struck down the men who opposed her determined will. (5)

Payne indicates that Appolodorus informs us that Hubris was the mother of Pan by Zeus, and theorizes that "we may expect to find her hidden away in the place where Zeus and Pan are to have been in partnership together, on Mount Lukaion, in Arcadia" (6). However shadowy her origin, Hubris appears in Greek drama often paired with Nemesis, "goddess of the greenwood tree, though she was to become later the most terrifying of portents" (6).

Payne asserts that, "There was no end to the theme of Greek pride. The Greeks understood the pride of Hubris ... but they also examined at great length and with infinite cunning all the permutations and combinations of pride" (20).

As a hero figure, Sethe is a modern exemplar of hubris, one of the "infinite ... permutations and combinations of pride." Slaves, by their very station in life were denied all the normal expressions of pride, but Sethe possesses this quality, an incongruous possession considering her status as chattel. Lattimore in his introduction to *The Iliad* remarks that: "It is the anger of pride, the necessary accompaniment of the warrior's greatness, that springs the tragedy of *The Iliad*" (47). Morrison's protagonist exhibits the rage of pride, a necessary element in her character as a heroic figure, even though for her it is a "pride that goes before a fall" (171).

Sethe belongs in the category of persons, heroic figures, for whom this fatal flaw becomes instrumental in their near destruction, primarily because there is an implicit connection between hubris, nemesis and the hero. Like the reincarnated child, Beloved, Sethe exhibits "the potent pride of the mistreated" (*Beloved* 96). The mistreatment challenges the very definition of her being by her enslavers - is she animal or human? She is outraged that "anybody white could take your whole self

for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore" (*Beloved* 251). But one could argue that others were equally enslaved and mistreated, but they did not exhibit Sethe's murderous rage. Her pride, as evident in challenging the slave system, seems to assert that the institution which victimized her and her children has the status of the divine, and in fact it did, for it has power over life and death, over freedom and enslavement. In murdering her child to save her from the pernicious slave system, Sethe is appropriating the power of the divine, the power of taking the life of her child.

If, as Payne argues, Hubris is accompanied by Nemesis, Sethe's hubris is repaid by exile from the incipient free community, and by the machinations of the ghost of the murdered infant who subsequently reappears at the age she would have been had she lived. Sethe's exile is both physical and psychological. Her isolation from the community of ex-slaves is the group's response to her overbearing pride. The community becomes her nemesis, and punishes her for "blindly, ferociously, heroically maintain[ing] the [rightness] of her action even to the point of self-destruction" (Payne, 45). After the murder of her child to save her and the other children from the slave catchers, a crowd gathers at the scene of the carnage. There is no sympathetic singing

from the gathering, a singing that should have been supportive and protective - "Some cape of sound would have been quickly wrapped around her like arms to hold and steady her on her way" (152). Unable to resist some of involvement, the crowd maintains a modicum of silence: "And then no words. Humming. No words at all" (152).

The profound silence is the recognition on the part of the crowd that the act was unnatural and that Sethe should have shown remorse. Instead they are infuriated by her silence: "She climbed into the cart, her profile knife-clean against a cheery blue sky. A profile that shocked them with its clarity. Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight?" (152). The crowd's unspoken verdict is that this woman must be ostracized and removed from the community of helping hands. "Her crime was staggering and her pride outstripped even that" (256) thus making it impossible for her community to come to her aid. Ultimately, the community of ex-slaves - not "a sweeter bunch of colored anywhere" - are troubled by her pride. As Stamp Paid remarks, "Pride, well, that bothers em a bit. They can get messy when they think somebody's too proud" (232).

Sethe's pride incapacitates her reasoning and makes her reluctant to solicit help when she needs it. At the graveside obsequies for Baby Suggs, Sethe's pride intervenes in the final farewell to the woman, who, "having devoted her freed life to harmony, was buried

amid a regular dance of pride, fear, condemnation and spite" (171). Following the murder of the child, no one in the community, except Stamp Paid, would set foot in 124 Bluestone Road. For this insult, Sethe retaliates with a refusal to participate in the rites - refusing to sing the hymns. That, in turn, spawns a refusal by the mourners: they do not eat the food Sethe provides. Her conduct on this occasion generates an unspoken expectation on the part of the townspeople that she would "come upon difficult times", that "pride goeth before a fall," (171) the manifestation of a pride that is "clean-cut and towering" (13). She lives alone at 124 Bluestone Road. The place where Baby Suggs, Holy, had preached and comforted the despairing, has become a place of desolation and abandonment. After the feast to end all feasts, itself a manifestation of hubris, Baby Suggs retires from the world, takes to bed, covers herself with a quilt, contemplates colors, and dies soon after.

It was about the time of the feast that the four slave catchers came riding into town. But none of the usual lines of communication worked that day:

> Not Ella, not John, not anybody ran down to 124 Bluestone Road, to say some new whitefolks with the Look just rode in. The righteous Look every Negro learned to recognize along with his ma'am's tit. Like a flag hoisted, this righteousness telegraphed and announced the faggot, the whip, the fist the lie, long before it went public. Nobody warned and he [Stamp Paid] always believed it wasn't the exhaustion from the long day's gorging that dulled them, but some other thing - like, well, meanness - that let them stand aside, or not pay attention or

> tell themselves somebody else was probably bearing the news already. (157)

There was unspoken resentment by the commmunity of newly freed slaves at the extravagant of the feast which none of them could ever equal, and which seemed to say that perhaps Baby Suggs "was special, blessed in some way that they were not" 157). Thus, Sethe is left alone with one living child to endure that depredations of the enraged ghost child.

Furthermore, Sethe's pride calls into question the sentiments of the community, the men and women whom she offended by her head held too high, and her "too thick love." They too had lost children, but they did not murder their offspring to save them. Ella had "understood Sethe's rage in the shed twenty years ago, but not her reaction to it, which Ella thought was prideful, misdirected, and Sethe herself was too complicated" (256). It is these qualities that set Sethe apart from the other members of the community of ex-slaves.

Psychologically, Sethe is left alone in the house of her mind and in the house at 124 Bluestone Road. Barbara Schapiro, (*The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's Beloved*), points out that:

> Psychic death ... involves the denial of one's being as a human subject. The infant self has an essential, primary need to be recognized and

> affirmed as a whole being, as an active agent of its own legitimate desires and impulses, and the fulfillment of this need is dependent on the human environment, on other selves. (195)

Absent any interaction with the community of ex-slaves who could the mitigate the "human environment, the other selves," Sethe retreats into a psychically damaging isolation which feeds on itself, that is, she embraces a denial of infant desires which affirm the legitimacy of the self. In the depths of Sethe's isolation, mother and child reverse roles: "Beloved bending over Sethe looked like the mother, Sethe the teething child" (250). Schapiro identifies this as "'love made hungry,' a terrifying greediness in which the baby fears it will devour and thus destroy the mother and, conversely, that mother (due to projection) will devour and destroy the self (Schapiro 196)." Only when the women in this community of ex-slaves reclaim Sethe as one of their own does her destructive psychic isolation end, and with it comes the disappearance of the cannibalistic ghost child now turned woman.

Sethe's rehabilitation is also aided by the fact that the community has seen her pride crushed to an infantile helplessness; her pride goes with her fall. Furthermore, Sethe's reclamation by the women of the community is engendered by Denver's developing autonomy,

by Paul D, and by the community that recognized that something grotesque had arrived that "Last August. Day of the carnival" (235). The recollection by Paul D that Beloved had appeared on a bridge around the time the carnival was in the town, is a powerful signal of closure. The bridge to upper world is about to be withdrawn, and the ghost child exorcised. This will occur only after Sethe "'conjure[s] up' her past - symbolized by Beloved and confronts is as an antagonist" (Henderson 92).

Like Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* has a nurturing male figure who, by stepping out of his traditional patriarchal role, is instrumental in shaping the life of the protagonist so that she can better achieve her heroic stature. Sethe's recovery of self is aided by Paul D, a character who has endured enormous grief and abuse, but a man with "educated hands" (99) and with "the thing in him, the blessedness, that has made him the kind of man who can walk in a house and make the women cry" (272). Like Tea Cake lovingly combing Janie's hair, Paul D does a wondrously tender and feminine act when he returns to Sethe's house after she has been left alone and essentially uncared for. Paul D heats water and bathes Sethe; he recollects the scars on her back - "her wrought-iron back;" her recalls her "tenderness about his neck jewelry - its three wands, like attentive

baby rattlers, curving two feet into the air." What is most important to Paul D is that this woman with "the delicious mouth" and "the mean black eyes" never mentions the obviously humiliating and degrading contraptions of slavery; her silence and the evasion of her eyes saved him shame and humiliation and "left him his manhood" (273). He pays himself the supreme compliment of wanting to "put his story next to hers." More importantly, he wants to be part of her future, for as he tells her, "We need some kind of tomorrow" (273). Paul D helps Sethe to shift the basis of her world view, the one which said her children were her best part of her. If her children were the best part of her, then Beloved would have understood eventually, and would have released her mother from the pangs of maternal regret, and she would have forgiven her mother's actions.

Paul D modifies Sethe's claim to assure her that *she* - not Denver, not Beloved - is her own best thing: "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (273). Paul D erases from Sethe's thinking the internalized slave rhetoric that values her based on the number of children she produced. In helping her to ordain her own epiphany, he assists her in the final emancipation from the legacy of slavery. His assurance is liberating, self-empowering and self-affirming; she does not resist. Instead she says, incredulously, "Me? Me?" For the first time in

her life, Sethe's emphasis is on herself, and not on her children.

As a type of African-American female hero, Sethe confronts the intolerable legacy of her history. She accepts that Beloved's "wandering between hell and history, continues to express the chaotic associations that result from muted feelings distorted into hate and rage" (Feder 120). Beloved is a symbol of "buried knowledge" (Feder 79), not only of the African-American experience in America, but also the buried knowledge of those who built a world of relative ease and opulence at the expense of others. Her "miraculous resurrection" enables a scrutiny and a celebration of a slave mother whose heroic act resurrects the past and and challenges the present.

Sethe, as an exemplar of the African-American female hero, is a conduit who carries with her the memory of the past, a memory of things and stories buried deep in the psyche of those who lived them, but found no way to articulate them. The desperate act of killing her child is not, in Aisenberg's words, "abnormal and extravagant, exceeding social necessity" (35). Her claim on her children is a subversive act, for the slaveholding society decreed that children of slaves do not belong to their parents. Her counterclaim that they are the best part of herself subverts and challenges the prerogatives of the slave owners.

Beloved's "miraculous resurrection" becomes the catalyst not only for a remembrance of the legions of the unmourned dead in the bottom of the Atlantic, the "Sixty Million and more" to whom the novel is dedicated, but also a celebration of a slave mother whose heroic act resurrected the past to confront the present. Sethe's life links the past to the present and points out the impossibility and chaos of unlivable lives, lives that needed "two heads", in other words, an ever present double consciousness. In the Middle Passage evocation in the novel, the Africans en route to American slavery are symbolized by Beloved who belongs to and is claimed by Sethe, by Denver, by everyone.

The relating of the stories by each of the three females in Sethe's household at the end of the novel is an attempt to impose order on the universe inhabited by the characters in the novel. With the restoration of order that comes with the expulsion of the ghost child, the chaos that is the breakdown of Sethe's sanity begins to dissipate. Part of the chaos is represented in the community of women's abhorrence at "the idea of past errors taking possession of the present" (256). There is the personal chaos of Sethe's life and her descent into insanity. Psychic wholeness is restored at the banishment of the resurrected child who creates a chaos of her own by the mere fact of her return.

When Morrison, at the end of the novel, asserts

that "This is not a story to pass on", she is reinforcing the notion that if Sethe's story and the story of the Sweet Home slaves are emblematic of the African-American experience, then the chaos of the lives of the slaves must be reordered into a coherent history which takes into account the traumatic experience and extrapolates from it values such as the elevation of the female protagonist to the prominence of hero.

Sethe's return home is not that of the traditional conquering hero but rather that of the bloodstained and battle-scarred warrior who has achieved a hard won and recuperative serenity after a tempestuous and traumatic life. She has fought her battles; she carries on her back the scars of a conflict in which she was a tenacious participant; she has emerged victorious, and with a desire to celebrate the power and dignity of her humanity and her womanhood. Her reward is a quiet place from which she will run no more, physically, emotionally, or psychologically. She has found a place where her mind which was homeless (204) will find a home, a safe haven, *nostos*. That is the goal of the hero's odyssey.

Chapter 3: A Certain Way of Being in This World

> *Studies in American Africanism, in my view, should be investigations of the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanist presence and personae have been constructed - invented - in the United States, and of the literary uses this fabricated presence has served.*
>
> Toni Morrison *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*

> *When we move beyond the classic stereotype, we can see that many ordinary women and men are actually heroes.*
>
> Miriam F. Polster *Eve's Daughters*

Zora Neale Hurston, in her third novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*(1937), fashions a protagonist who is a prototype of the African-American female hero. Aside from the very centrality of the protagonist's place in the novel, the claim for this designation lies in her resistance to definition by others, and to the extent to which she creates an image of herself that asserts the dignity and integrity of her womanhood. Janie's struggles (like the struggles of the traditional Occidental hero) are ultimately, as much with the forces of the supernatural or the other-worldly, as with the forces that limit the lives and the dreams of women, and inhibit their aspirations. Hurston's female hero exhibits a tenacity that enables her to chart a course of her own in the face of opposition, to assert the dignity and the primacy of her womanliness, and to overcome the consciousness of psychological and political oppression,

and challenge the patriarchal forces which inhibit and denigrate her desire for self-fulfillment.

The legacy of slavery and denigration has been a massive burden borne by the African-American female. This legacy is an encumbrance which is inscribed in the literature and has an unintended consequence: female heroism is typically overlooked. In literature as in life, women's dreams and aspirations are often sublimated to mindless domesticity. For some, the notion of African-American female hero is an oxymoron, primarily because the female exists in a world in which she is marginalized and disregarded except as an appendage to the male. There are, however, protagonists who transcend the bombardment of insults and humiliations that daily assault them, and seek a path that leads to self-discovery and self-valuation.

The contrast between the active public lives of men and the passive, unseen lives of women is both a reproach and challenge for the female hero. Though she exists in a milieu that minimizes her, and though she is constantly humiliated, Janie resists the efforts to derogate her. Instead she enters on a path to self-discovery, self-valuation, and self-affirmation, a journey to confidence and consciousness, that begins with an escape from psychological domination and from diffidence and unconsciousness.

As an exemplar of female heroism, Janie is not confined to realms of the impracticable, to dreaming and remembering, but to creating and achieving, even if the parameters of her achievement are defined by the traditions of marriage. In the process, Janie becomes a model of the female hero, for an "emergence of woman-consciousness ... has taken place" (Daly 14). The emergence of the "woman-consciousness" is marked in the pronouncement, in the opening page of the novel: "So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead." (Hurston 1). Woman-consciousness demarcates the differences in the lives of men and women and functions as a frame for the portrayal of the protagonist and hero. Between the beginning and the end of the story lies the saga of a woman's life, the schematic of the life of a woman.

Zora Neale Hurston's peripatetic and much-married protagonist, Janie Mae Crawford-Killicks-Starks-Woods, whose uncharacteristic quest and growth into self-hood and self-discovery personifies the hero figure, has a perspective on the world that is indeed original. As an adolescent, who has received no formal education, and therefore no expanded vision of the world through cultural traditions, she has a truly original notion of what her life should be like. She visualizes her world in highly imaginative and idyllic terms - through the blossoming pear tree and the ever-expanding horizon.

Other figures in the novel (notably Jody Starks and Tea Cake) share Janie's imaginative and poetic reach and have aspirations for enhanced material worth. Few, however, view their lives as something to be lived with fulfillment and gratification beyond the dreams of their compatriots.

Janie Mae Crawford's heroism lies in the fact that, conscious of her power as a woman, she imagines the way her life should be and acts to implement it. Hurston's protagonist rejects the limitation of a life lived in memory, and instead challenges herself to embark on a quest to attain the horizon, however nebulous and impalpable that horizon may be. The action takes place in the small spaces of her life within the framework of marriage, as opposed to male action occurring, for instance, on the vastness of the seas sailed by ships. Her journey is not without challenges for there are patriarchal forces which inhibit and denigrate her desire for self-fulfillment.

Hurston's protagonist, Janie, embarks on her own quest for littorals that are figurative and analogous to an odyssey, the journey of her life as lived in marriage. Her heroism is figured in the degree to which the quest replicates the wanderings characteristic of an odyssey. Hurston's heroine resists the stereotype of the suppressed subordinate woman, and instead challenges herself to live a life that attempts to sail to the

horizon, that is, to require more than the ordinary out of marriage. In the course of this journey, there are detours that lead to deadening cul-de-sacs, and Janie is buffeted by waves of oppression and degradation by husbands who do not invest in her vision of marriage.

Hurston in asserting the claims for heroism configures a character who lays the foundation for, and establishes the parameters for departures from the fixed courses that circumscribe the lives of women. Women's lives do not have to be wastelands of sterile, numbing domesticity. Although Janie has articulated her life in the figures of pollen and the blossoming pear tree, and the quest for the horizon, there is an unspoken and elusive yet deeply powerful figure that measures the satisfaction of her life - that figure is articulated in the theme of the ships which have the potential for wish-fulfillment. Hurston uses the image to fortify the notion that dominates her protagonist's view of her life.

The novel opens with the evocative and enigmatic line, "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board" (1). Ships have traditionally launched the male hero both literally and figuratively. The ship is the domain of male exploration and adventure, the vehicle through which the hero explores the world, tests his mettle, and wins fame and adulation. The domain of the ship is a world that is alien to women, reinforced in the view that a woman on board was bad luck. That a woman-

centered novel begins with the image of sailing, an occupation that takes men from the mundane to the world of adventure, suggests that women should seek adventures in "ships" of their own creation. Thus an odyssey may be charted in the small spaces that women inhabit if they dare to dream and act to fulfill their wishes. The analogue which epitomizes the world of maleness simultaneously delineates the world of femaleness.

Hurston transfers the image of the ship from the locale of real or imagined adventure to a locale that is the domain of women. The "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board" a place where men's "dreams [are] mocked to death by Time (1, my emphasis). Juxtaposed to the image of the ship as the repository of men's dreams is the evocation of the lives of women whose existence seems to be characterized by dreaming and forgetting. The opening contrast to the perceived active lives of men versus the ostensibly passive, unseen lives of women is both an indictment of the failure of women to act and a challenge to them to resist complacency and limited dreams. Hurston makes the dream not only axiomatic of truth: "The dream is the truth," but also the basis for female action.

Hurston seems to be making the distinction between memory and history, and the unreliability of memory. Pierre Nora (*Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire)* points out that "Memory and history, far from

being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name" for "...At the heart of history is a critical discourse that is antithetical to spontaneous memory" (285-6).

The problem for the African-American females whose memory of their "living societies" has either been erased by the degradation of slavery or has been too brutal and excruciating to recollect, is how to reconcile the conflicting claims of history and memory. Hurston resolves this conflict by imagining a woman whose life may be read as the analogue of an African-American odyssey. Hurston's story is a domestic version of the notorious Middle Passage, an agonizing journey that is the nexus of transplantation and "ideological and imperialistic rationales for subjugation" (*Playing in the Dark* 8).

The Middle Passage is both a trope in African-American literature and the historical locale of unspeakable horror; it occurs in the work of each of the authors considered in this study. As the locale of a journey of terror, the Middle Passage "conjures up the helplessness, darkness, stench, congestion, misery, and fear" (Bell 169) of the Transatlantic crossing in the belly of slave-ships from Africa to the New World. This experience is replicated in the apocalyptic hurricane and the destructive flood it generated when Lake Okechobee

"with braced-up waters like a road crusher on a cosmic scale" (239) engulf and nearly drown Janie and Tea Cake. And yet, countless thousands survived the terrible crossing of the Middle Passage and survived even more dehumanizing experiences in the Americas, even as Janie survives the cataclysm and Tea Cake's hydrophobic effort to kill her.

As a trope in literature, the Middle Passage is central to the experience of African-Americans because of its evocations of transplantation, diaspora, uprootedness, and other "metaphors of journey and exile" (Gilroy 211). While Hurston does not explicitly name the experience of capture and exile, the theme is evident in the opening lines of the novel, identifies the one image, that of "ships at a distance" which resonates in the ancestral memory of African-Americans. In the metaphor of ships at a distance, Hurston conflates memory and history and they converge in the figure of the protagonist, who, however subliminally, carries within her being the twin legacies of history and imagination. In literature as in life, the ship becomes both the metaphor of fulfillment of dreams for some and the betrayer of dreams for others. The journey of the Middle Passage, both literally and figuratively, fulfills the dreams of some (those for whom the human cargo meant wealth) and betrays the dreams of others, those whose bodies represented wealth. The ship is thus an

appropriate image as it evokes the history of the protagonist.

In Hurston's configuration, the dreams of women - "every woman," the universal, the generic female - are capable of fulfillment if the individual has the imagination and the will to transform and illuminate the mundane. Although there is no assurance that women's dreams will be fulfilled dreams, what is significant is that the dreams exist, and women, ships, and dreams are on the ocean with the potential for success.

The opening action of Hurston's novel speaks to the power contained in subverting the limitations of the lives of heroic women, lives which navigate the dreams they can envision and actualize the realities that they can fulfill. Clearly the protagonist is returning from a heroic journey. There is something portentous about the introduction of a female character whose first entry into the novel has echoes of the legacy of Eve, mother of us all and originator of The Fall. Clearly something catastrophic has occurred, and the participant in and representative of the narrative *'this'* is a woman, our hero, Janie:

> So the beginning of this was a woman and she had comeback from burying the dead. Not the dead of the sick and ailing with friends at the pillow and the feet. She had come back from the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide

> open in judgment. (9)

Like Eve, Janie seems to have some blame for the disastrous events that led to innumerable sudden deaths. Read another way, however, Janie can be seen as a survivor, one who through her own agency or the instrumentality of others has lived to recount the tragedies and the victories she has experienced. The experiences have moved her from "a stage of infantilization ... into mature and responsible competence" (Polster 3). Unhappily or otherwise, Janie has been admitted into the fellowship of those who have seen much, who have "reach[ed] a new clarity about human existence" (Schein 7) in the context of her having overcome great perils. These perils have taught her that to be human in the world is to be action-oriented, to make choices for self-affirmation and autonomy, to celebrate life and living.

As an exemplar of the hero figure, Janie embarks on a quest, not for glory but for fulfillment, so she charts her own course and asserts her claims to autonomy and self-affirmation in her response to her marriages. She redefines the restricted space of marriage and makes that space the venue for an internal journey of self-discovery and self-affirmation. Initially, her grandmother, Nanny attempts to set the course of Janie's life by mischanneling her granddaughter's passionate longings expressed in the image of the blossoming pear tree into a

marriage based on economic security. Janie acknowledges that "her conscious life had commenced at Nanny's gate" (23) under the blossoming pear tree, an emblem of her budding sexuality. Frightened by the raw sexuality she detects in the lacerating kiss Johnny Taylor gives Janie, the old woman proposes that her granddaughter get married immediately to Logan Killicks, an aging farmer, whose major qualification as spouse to the attractive adolescent girl is his sixty acres.

Janie's marriage to the farmer, Logan Killicks places her in an agricultural setting which roots and plants her in a space that negates the possibility of navigation and of "ships that sail forever on the horizon." Farming as practiced by Killicks is a rough, uncultured, and unimaginative existence. As a representative of the agricultural mode of living, he is an emblem of rootedness, the antithesis of navigation, with its overtones of voyaging, adventure, and discovery. For him, there is no journey, for he has already arrived at the place where he wants to be - a farmer with sixty acres and a mule. There is nothing bucolic about life on Killicks' sixty acres; his is not the existence of the gentleman farmer.

Janie deems marriage to Killicks as a kind of death of all the hopes encompassed in the blossoming pear tree (38). Her "dreams [are] mocked to death" not so much by time but by the deadening power of an "ole skullhead in

de grave yard," as she characterizes the man with whom she is expected to spend the rest of her life (28). Marriage to Killicks and his often-mentioned sixty acres is tantamount to death in life and a death of the quest for transcendence. Janie views the period before her wedding as "a few days to live before she went to Logan Killicks" (38). She does not resist the marriage; she resists the death that the marriage represents. Elizabeth Hayes, in an essay, "Like Seeing You Buried: Persephone in *The Bluest Eye, Their Eyes Were Watching God, and The Color Purple*," asserts that Janie's resistance to her husband Killicks has echoes in the Persephone myth. The myth, Hayes argues:

> ... is vitally concerned with the politics of power: how the marginalized gain a voice within a social system, how women achieve strong, positive identities in a culture that wants to define them only as objects of male ownership.
>
> (170)

Hayes's analogy collapses in that, in the Persephone myth, the young woman is compelled to live with Pluto for half the year in the interest of the survival of humankind. While, as I will argue, Janie subsequently goes to a variation of the Underworld, it is not with Killicks whom she abandons when a more promising mate appears.

As a questing woman, Janie expects more from her marriage than protection and material support (41); she expects love, "a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time," expectations that are consonant with the aspirations of a hero figure. Consequently, she languishes in the restricted sexual spaces women inhabit. Rather, her wish on the loveless boat of her marriage is illustrative of her view that her marriage will ensure an end to "the cosmic loneliness of the unmated" (38). What little romance Killicks nurtures, is exhausted in the first year of the marriage. As she tells her grandmother, "Some folks never was meant to be loved, and [Killicks] was one of them" (42). When she finds the marriage physically dissatisfying and spiritually empty, she is not prepared to remain in it merely because of her husband's sixty acres. Janie's loneliness is further exacerbated by her husband's physical unattractiveness; she hates "de way his head is so long one way and so flat on de sides and dat pone uh fat back uh his neck ... his belly is too big ... and his toe-nails look lak mule foots" (42). His unhygienic personal habits are revolting: she would "ruther be shot wid tacks than tuh turn over in de bed and stir up the air while he is dere" (42). This is an unkind destiny for someone who "wants things sweet with [her] marriage" (43).

To validate her protagonist as a hero figure, Hurston presents her as antagonist to her grandmother.

Janie's desires are in direct conflict with her grandmother's vision of security in marriage. "Nanny desires land; Janie desires landscape, and escape from Killicks' sixty acres to a life which offers wider possibilities" (Dixon 87). Janie's desire for love in her marriage is an alien idea to her grandmother. The old woman spends a long night on her knees plumbing hitherto uncharted, unexplored depths of her consciousness. Nanny's death, after a long night on her knees, further liberates Janie who now has one less opponent in her exploration of uncharted emotional and psychological regions which are the domain of the female hero. As Hayes points out:

> Plainly, Nanny believes that women are powerless to prevent abuse - and indeed, she has submitted to her own abuse, her daughter's, and Janie's. Loving and well-intentioned though she may be, Nanny cannot guide Janie toward the self-fulfillment or self-expression that might save her from patriarchal abuse. (181)

Janie is remarkable for within the restricted space of marriage, she rejects the female role of subservience and docility. Becoming a mature woman in the marriage to Killicks, Janie is increasingly more perceptive and analytical of her husband's repressive actions and she refuses to be an acquiescent victim. When he sets out to acquire another mule ostensibly to increase the yield of

his potato farm by running two ploughs, she is skeptical, noncommittal and resentful, and barely veils her hostility to his plan.

In this encounter, a battle of wills takes place in which the protagonist faces an antagonist, and the hero figure is called on to slay a figurative dragon. The scene is a tableau in which Janie is objectified as mule, and Killicks tries to assert his dominance as husband. As he saddles his mule, he addresses her as *LilBit*, a diminutive which resonates with images of control, evoking the restraining device placed in the mouth of an animal. Furthermore, 'Lil' also diminishes her. There is a double meaning in his words and menace in his voice as he tells her he needs another mule "all gentled up so even a woman can handle him" (46). Holding his wad of tobacco "real still in his jaw like a thermometer of his feelings," he studies Janie's face and waits for her to say something. The tension is eased when Janie seemingly concurs with his request. What emerges from this tableau is Janie's assertion of her "self-defined standpoint" (Collins 91) and Janie's familiarity with the "language and manners of the oppressor" (Collins 91). She knows intuitively from the sparring in their conversation that the additional mule is intended to annihilate all resistance by wearing her out with mindless and repetitive labor. Clearly, she has rejected his definition of her role as mule in the marriage. Her

resistance not only empowers her but enables her to define herself and her perspective as autonomous and capable of pursuing her quest.

Janie proclaims her heroism through her willingness to undertake new experiences within the sphere available to her - marriage. Hurston is asserting that the hero must speak for herself, much be an agent of her own destiny; the authority for her own life must be assured. Her marriage to Killicks founders, wrecked on a cosmic sea of loneliness and lovelessness (43). She makes the important discovery that "marriage did not make love...[her] first dream was dead so she became a woman" (44). To facilitate a departure from Killicks' farm, Janie positions herself where she can see the road while doing her chores, and is rewarded by the appearance of Jody Starks who has two important qualifications: "He walked like he knew where he was going" (47) and although "he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees," emblems of her adolescence and pre-marital experience and of her ideals in marriage, he "spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance" (50).

Janie's need to pursue the quest for horizon both transcends and annuls the legitimacy of a marriage in which she was "spoken for" by her grandmother. Thus, undeterred by the formalities of marriage, she exercises personal autonomy and responsibility for her life and elopes with Jody Starks. Embarking on her second

marital "adventure", and using the internalized image of the pear tree to figure her life (Bond, 206), Janie sets out to build a new relationship with Jody Starks, in her second marriage. She settles down with Jody Starks even though he is inadequate in certain very critical areas that figure enormously in her perception of marriage.

Marriage to Jody Starks provides the potential for the for fulfillment of Janie's dream. The tape by which Janie measures her relationship to Jody is based on a resistance to male domination of the female. His need to dominate Janie is the governing principle of his life. "He wanted her submission and he'd keep on fighting until he felt he had it." Submission was the one thing Jody never got even in his fatal illness. In the events prior to his illness and subsequent death, he excoriates what he sees as cruel deception: "Making all that show of humbleness and scorning him all the time! Laughing at him, and now putting the town up to do the same" (124). Jody has misread his wife. The woman who has no mind of her own - he has to "think for women and chillun and chickens and cows" (110) - has a far greater understanding of life. She understands that to be human in the world is not to "trample and mash down and then die ruther than to let yo'self heah 'bout it;" to be human is to "pacify somebody besides yo'self if you wants any love and sympathy in dis world" (133).

In this contest for dominance, Jody has the advantage of male authority and his wife's reluctance to challenge him. However, the price he pays for her grudging accommodation to some of his wishes is an extension of the sexual repression implicit in the compulsory wearing of the head rag. "The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor" (111). The unintended consequence of this victory on Jody's part is that Janie "destroys Jody's mental hold over her" (Bobb 3). Thus freed emotionally and psychically, Janie challenges her husband publicly after he humiliates her by reminding her of her age and her sagging body. As she put it, "mixin' up mah doings wid mah looks." (122). Her retort shatters him irrevocably. She asserts her femaleness, "Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it." To diminish him she casts him in not only in female terms, but in terms of the unempowered female: "When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life." Janie co-opts his language of abuse, repackages it, and sends it back to him using language and images whose power to demolish he is schooled in. More importantly, she has "robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish" (123).

The confrontation with Jody occurs in the store in the presence of several men who had earlier measured the power of their masculinity by the extent to which they

controlled their women. To be thus publicly feminized, and laughed at is more then Jody can tolerate. This incident marks the beginning of his physical decline and subsequent death. In a more equal marriage, Jody would have recognized Janie's need for self-empowerment instead of asserting the destructive patriarchal value of dominating women. He would have acknowledged that "women's lives are intricately bound up with those of men - biologically, emotionally, socially, and professionally - [and that] women's liberation is essentially linked with full human liberation" (Daly, 25). Janie realizes this fact, and seeks a marriage that has room for her personal autonomy. Jody's failure to honor her humanity results in his imposing on her an oppressive dominance which she resists.

Janie is unique among the protagonists discussed in this study : she is childless, a fact which enables her in her quest for the horizon. hooks points out that "gender allows black men to travel; it frees them, makes them Ulysses figures: the burden of the race is placed upon women who are grounded," usually by motherhood (GSUC Mini-Course Feb., 1995). Not only is Janie childless, but she is contented in her childlessness. Nowhere in the novel does she express regret at not having children. Janie rejects the notion that motherhood is her *raison d'etre*. As a model of a new kind of African-American female, Janie represents the autonomous female whose

mobility is ensured for she does not consciously engage the issue of motherhood as the function of her life. On the contrary, when she visits her grandmother to discuss the emptiness of the marriage to Killicks, Nanny misreads the cause of the visit and attributes it to Janie's being "knocked up already." Janie is careful to point out that she is "all right that way," that is, not pregnant, and she is emphatic that is not that case, when she says, "Ah *know* 'tain't nothin' dere" (40). This is the sole reference in the text to Janie as a potential mother.

Janie's quest for the "horizon" and for self-fulfillment is a form of resistance to subordinating individual desires and personal satisfaction to the demands of childrearing. In exempting her protagonist from the constraints of motherhood, Hurston frees her to operate in a private sphere in which she can nurture a dream of quest. The capacity to see herself as a complete woman without children is essential to Janie's pursuit of "far horizon." Motherhood would extinguish all possibilities for her quest for horizon.

Davies points out the conflict inherent in "the historical construction of the Black woman as 'the great mother'" (135). Citing Jeffner Allen's essay, "Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women," Davies suggests that Allen sees "child-bearing as a definite 'marking' or stamping of women" in which "the mark of motherhood inscribes the domination of men into women's bodies"

(137). The conflict lies in the realization that, for some women, motherhood "is a truly burdensome condition that stifles their creativity, exploits their labor, and makes them partners in their own oppression" (Collins 118). Furthermore, as Collins argues, "African-American women's experiences as mothers have been shaped by the dominant group's efforts to harness Black women's sexuality and fertility to a system of capitalist exploitation" (40). In the African-American world view, a woman could desert her husband but not her children. And if Janie did as her mother Leafy did, it would be because of some monstrous abuse which shattered her sanity and created a motherless child.

Hurston's silence on the issue of Janie's childlessness may be attributed to evasiveness on the author's part, since she does not comment overtly on the issue of motherhood for Janie. There are elements in the text, however, that rupture this silence and position Hurston emphatically on the issue of motherhood. One could argue that Hurston extends the metaphor of women as mules of the world to Janie as a childless woman. The mule metaphor as it occurs in the text rejects the idea of women as burden bearers; Janie's rejection of Killicks attempt to co-opt her as a laborer provides implicit support of the author's intent. Childless women are often referred to derogatively as mules but there is no such specific reference in the text. Hurston seems to be

asserting a larger claim - that "female growth and independence depend on a rejection of patriarchal family patterns" (*Memory of Kin* 307); these patterns view progeny as the source of immortalizing the male, and fecundity as a primary reason for female existence. Chesler, in *Mothers on Trial*, cautions that while "Children satisfy both male and female longings for genetic immortality, intimacy, authority, and family life," there is a real danger of children being owned or legally controlled (xxvii). Though it is not possible to authenticate Hurston's views on motherhood and children, that Hurston rejects these patterns for Janie asserts her protagonist's intrinsic value as an autonomous being.

The novel presents a series of signs that allow the reader to interpret and assess those elements in the text that guide the reader to the Hurston's implicit viewpoint on Janie's childlessness. Firstly, Janie herself has no parental or maternal model to guide her. Her first references to her parents and to her life are presented in the context of the "great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches" (20). The juxtaposition of suffering and doom suggests inadequacy and powerlessness. She is for all practical purposes an orphan. For a start, she does not know her father or her mother, and would not recognize either one if she saw them. She remarks, "Ah ain't never seen mah papa. And ah didn't

know 'im if Ah did. Mah mama neither. She was gone from round dere long before Ah wuz big enough to know" (20).

In relating the story of her life, Janie does not know where to start, because her life lacks the order and the continuity that are conducive to a chronological and methodical recounting of the story of one's life. For another, she has no real stories about her parents, stories that would give order and meaning to her fashioning mental pictures of them. She cannot reconstruct, reimage, or reinvent, or rememory them, because she has never experienced them. Mary Helen Washington *(Memory of Kin)* points out that "Much of what we call family is constructed through memory - what we remember and pass on becomes an essential part of family" (7). Because Janie does not know either parent, she has no memory of them and cannot construct a family with which to model her own family. Not only is she disconnected from her biological parents, but Nanny who functions *in loco parentis,* is unable to fill her granddaughter's emotional and psychological needs because she is the maid-of-all work for the Washburns and has rejected married life for herself because she "didn't want nobody mistreating mah baby" (36).

In creating a childless protagonist, Hurston is demythologizing motherhood and its implicit embodiment of selflessness and nurturance (Pearson and Pope 40). As a childless woman, Janie is free to pursue her dreams of

self-fulfillment, and to find value and gratification in something other than "delicious fecundity" (Woolf 25). As a protagonist, Hurston's hero has chosen pursuit of her dream and the possibility of its achievement over motherhood. Furthermore, in being childless, Janie is asserting autonomy over her body. Her childlessness is liberating of herself and ultimately of other women, released from the obligation of bearing children and from the stigma of infertility. Thus, free from the burdens and the restricting responsibilities of children, Janie is enabled in her quest for self-discovery and self-fulfillment. She is empowered to pursue her own holy Grail, a marriage in which "until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything" (54).

Complicating the absence of family structure, is the fact that the young Janie is so integrated in the Washburn family that she does not differentiate herself from the Washburn children. Janie is caught in a cultural void in which there is an absence of an ex-slave community that could be provided by an extended family which would inculcate in her the values and norms of the group. Part of the function of the extended family is the presence of a "social other worthy of her trust," one to tell her stories, and to be told the stories of the group. This absence of self-recognition and the feeling of being an outsider are highlighted when Janie does not

recognize herself in the unauthorized photograph that the Washburn children commission from an itinerant photographer. Not only does Janie not know what she looks like, she has been seeing herself as part of the group of white children who up to this point form her community: "Ah was wid dem white chillun so much Ah didn't know Ah wuzn't white till Ah was round six years old" (21). When she does not recognize the self she visualizes, she is dismayed and asks poignantly, "Where is me? Ah don't see me."

In a very profound sense, this question is at the heart of Janie's quest - finding the answer to a crucial, central question, "Don't you know yo ownself?" Janie experiences a sad epiphany, discovering for one, that she is colored, and for another realizing that "many people had done named [her] different names" (21). Janie's brief carefree world is shattered by the images in a photograph because she "could not re-create the meaning(s) inscribed in those pictures (*Memory of Kin)* (8). This inability to envision an autonomous self creates a barrier to self-affirmation. John Hauss, writing about Harriet Jacobs ("*Perilous Passages*"), asserts the following:

> The nonthreatening social world which the child so briefly 'trusts,' and within which trust in others seems both possible and part of this world's desirability, is recognized with the space of a

> few lines as a realm in which simple trust proves naive and self-defeating.
>
> (*The Discourse of Slavery* 146-7).

Janie's trust in the world of her childhood is both naive and self-defeating. With no mother figure, and no extended community to reinforce identity through name, through race, and through story-telling, Janie can truthfully say she does not know herself and cannot name herself. This absence of connectedness and of self-recognition may account for Janie's disconnecting from the idea of motherhood.

That the author has chosen a protagonist whose life experience challenges intrinsic cultural values, seems to say that she "understands at some level that women are primary beings, and that they are not ultimately defined according to patriarchal assumptions in relation to fathers, husbands, or male gods" (Pearson and Pope 12). Furthermore, as Pearson and Pope argue, in constructing an unconventional hero, the author is asserting that there is no "real ambivalence in the author's mind about women and the female role" (11). What emerges from Hurston's heroine is "a birth of consciousness" (Norman 23).

Also singular in the novel, is the fact that none of Janie's husbands remark on her not having provided him with a son and heir, or a daughter and heiress. She may have aligned herself with the biological fact that her

childlessness establishes a potential for male culpability, a tacit acknowledgment of male impotence that empowers her and her gender and allows her freedom of movement. Furthermore, both her husbands were older, experienced men, neither of whom was a father. Jody Starks is himself mistaken for her father when he first arrives in town: "You and yo' daughter goin' tuh join wid us in fellowship?" Amos Hicks asks him as he introduces himself to Jody. This misreading of the marital relationship is ominous, for it presages that Janie may become "embroiled in a relationship which reenacts the painful relationship with the father without ever finding a way to exit from a male-defined garden" (Pearson & Pope 124).

The ages of her husbands, rather than highlighting her inexperience serve to present her as their equal and a woman of considerable assurance. She is disdainful of Logan Killicks's sixty acres because that is all he has, and all he values. Marriage to him sharpens the contrast between his prosaic life and values and intensifies the poetry of her imagination and her dream of horizon. Thus faced with the disappointment of marriage to Killicks, Janie retreats into a poetic imagination in which she communes with the natural world, a world whose language she understood:

> She knew things nobody had ever told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind

> ... She knew the world was a stallion rolling in the blue pasture of ether. She knew that God tore down the old world every evening and built a new one by sun-up. (44)

Although the marriage fails, it provides an opportunity for self-formulation and self-discovery. One thing Janie discovers is that she wants a transcendent existence in a poetic landscape instead of Killicks' land.

Collins suggests that "Black daughters with strong self-definitions and self-valuations who offer serious challenges to oppressive situations may not physically survive." Janie is not really a daughter in the tradition of African-American matriarchy. She is essentially a motherless child, and her surrogate mother has not been especially nurturing. But Janie is a survivor, and although in the marriage to Jody her quest for horizon is delayed and postponed, it is not abandoned. For a young woman brought up by an ex-slave grandmother, Janie has very lofty and seemingly unattainable ideals. She is heroic, not only because she dares to dream, but because her ideas and ideals are engendered by an innate sense of her sovereignty and an assertion of personal autonomy. Claudia Tate suggests that:

> The black heroine's awareness of herself, first as a human being and second as a woman, is firmly secured in her psychological makeup. Her quest

> for self-affirmation almost always begins with this point of awareness and develops as she qualifies her individual desires, and defines the nature of her relationships with other people. In so doing the black heroine must relate with herself, others, and the world around with increasing clarity. This may appear to be simple and ordinary, but is actually quite complex and demands intense introspection.
>
> (Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work*,xxiv)

Janie's "intuitive awareness of the exceptional in life" (Bobb 1), casts her in the mold of a black woman who "survives humiliation, discrimination and defeat" (Goodrich, xvi), a characteristic of the quintessential female hero. Personal wealth was not a major criterion for Janie in her choice of husbands; she rejected Logan Killicks' sixty acres in favor of Jody's unrealized potential as an inspiriting spouse. As a widow, she abandons Jody's legacy for a life of love and adventure with a more compatible spouse. Janie has a strong sense that life was more than material wealth, a sense that as a woman she was entitled to a life that radiated beauty, envisioned possibility, and respected her aspirations, however preposterous those aspirations might seem. Janie inhabits "a lyrical world [which] offers sanctuary for the self while allowing for public survival" (Bobb, 1). Her triumphs are limited to the world of human

relationships as circumscribed by marriage, but she refuses to exist in a relationship that totally submerges her.

Two mythological resonances serve to establish the protagonist, Janie, as a viable hero and "actant-subject"[11] as well as "focalizer of most of the action of the narrative" (Doherty 21). In the role of actant, Janie is the focus of a "sub-plot" - authored by her two husbands and evident in the language both use to describe her - that seeks to metamorphose her. The resonances elucidate the restrictive and demeaning roles which Janie's husbands seek to impose on her, and establish Janie as a heroic figure whose travails echo those of Odysseus. In the process of dehumanizing her, Killicks and Starks unwittingly embrace roles that feminize them, and they become, as it were, variants of the Circe- and Calypso- figures with power to dehumanize. The power to transform lies in the power of the language each husband uses to dehumanize his wife. Both husbands, in a losing battle for dominance, seek to metamorphose Janie. Killicks puts her like a mule behind a plow and seeks to transform her into that creature. Starks places her on a pedestal and attempts to make her an icon of his own creation.

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[11] In the epic tradition, the actant is usually a male.

The effort on the part of the husbands to demean and dehumanize Janie becomes a test by which she must prove herself of heroic dimensions. The husbands' words seem to fulfill Nanny's words that "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see," in spite of Nanny's aspirations for Janie to be other than "a work-ox and a brood-sow." As a Circe-figure Killicks seeks to silence her by metaphorically transforming her into an animal, a mule to be used as he sees fit. In a very real sense, Janie is a castaway on Killicks sixty-acre farm for she did not willingly concur with marriage to him. As he tells her in anger "You ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh" (52). Furthermore, in his rage at Janie's back-talk and at her obvious disdain for him, he threatens to kill her: "Ah'll take holt uh dat ax and come in dere and kill yuh!" (53). In his ire and his frustration, her life has less value than that of a mule, for he would value the mule too much to kill it. He is thwarted in his plans to treat Janie like "de mule uh de world" by Jody Starks, who rescues her from impending degradation.

Jody breaks the spell by recognizing that Killicks's role for his wife is dehumanizing, and by declaring most emphatically to Janie, "You behind a plow! You ain't got no mo' business wid a plow than uh hog is got wid uh holiday! You aint got no business cuttin' up seed p'taters neither" (49). He offers her an escape from

Killicks' deadening sixty acres, and the possibility of "far horizon" where "until death she was going to have flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything", and most of all new words for her old thoughts (54-55). However, Jody Starks also co-opts the language of dehumanization. Jody seems to empower Janie for he provides her with a route to the horizon and a vision of a better world, one that is more worthy of her. However, he merely elevates her from plough to a pedestal, and ultimately to a barrage of animal images.

Jody Starks promises to make her "A pretty doll-baby ... made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan [herself]" (49). In addition, outranking the wives of all the other men, she should see herself as the "bell-cow, the other women as the gang" (66). Both men speak of Janie in non-human terms, "mule' and 'doll-baby,' asserting the power inherent in naming, and imposing names that are themselves disparaging. Polster *(Eve's Daughters)* observes that "Throughout history, women have been given easy access to one particular piece of turf - the pedestal" (107). This is the one area that Jody readily concedes to his wife. Elevation to Jody's pedestal is as deadening, restrictive, and demeaning as being yoked to Killicks' plow.

Janie is initially seduced by Jody's words that promise "far horizon, change and chance" (50). He reassures her that he is no Circe: "Janie, if you think

Ah aims to tole you off and make a dog outa you, youse wrong. Ah wants to make a wife outa you" (50). He offers her respectability and prestige, not dehumanization as a 'dog'. What Janie cannot know at this time is that Jody's perceptions of the role of a wife are just as deadening as labor on Killicks farm, particularly when his great ambitions are fulfilled. For him, a wife is transformed through the bestowing of his name and status. In his relation with Janie, however, Jody Starks also is a Circe-figure. His wife "must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang" (66), and as such she must serve his purposes.

Janie, as an ideal of the female hero, survives humiliation, regimentation, and dehumanization, and the concomitant loss of identity, initiated by her spouses. The effort by Janie's husbands to transform and transmogrify her has implications for her resistance to domination by men who represent traditional patriarchal forces that inhibit the lives of women. Perhaps it is the uncertainty of their own masculinity that causes these men to subordinate Janie. Killicks and Sparks may be viewed as feminized men who have taken on the attributes of the archetypal seductresses, in this case Circe and Calypso, respectively and seek to silence her. Neither husband sees her as a viable human being with aspirations of her own. Jody empowers the community by his projects, but in the process seeks to divest his wife

of personal power, and dehumanize her. Her role is to be an attractive but silent prop. Her function in Jody's case is to outdress all the other women attending the opening of his general store, thereby enhancing his own status. In this manner, Janie is reduced to her usefulness as a backdrop for her new husband, and as such his "wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. [He] never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (69).

To escape devolution to the status of object, Janie must resist her husband's efforts to denigrate and diminish her even as the traditional hero fights to overcome those obstacles which would overpower him. She does this in part by retreating into herself and by an overpowering silence "for no matter what Jody did, she said nothing" (118). Even the towns-people comment on the fact that "She sho don't talk much," (79). Janie's resistance is predicated on her intuition that there is more to life than pleasing husbands, and sleeping with authority (74), or deferring to a husband who cowed others with the "bow-down command in his face" (75). She has achieved a measure of clarity about what it means to be human in the world. To be human is to be compassionate to other living creatures, even a useless mule, and to accept others for the way they are.

Jody's death frees Janie physically and psychically. One of the first things she does to

Jody's death frees Janie physically and psychically. One of the first things she does to liberate herself is to burn all the head rags she had to wear like some ole 'oman round de store" (79) covering up her long rope of hair. She also does a retrospective self-evaluation. "Years ago she had told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass" (134). When she looks in the mirror after twenty odd years, what she sees is not a young girl, but a handsome woman. Gilbert and Gubar comment on the significance of the looking glass in women's emotional and psychic life. The young girl looking in the mirror is the inexperienced woman seeking a viable self. Janie has transcended youth and inexperience and has achieved maturity and wisdom; she has not lost the desire to be illuminate her tiny sphere like all the "tumbling mud-balls." Like the woman in Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's poem, (an enraged prisoner) "The Other Side of the Mirror," Janie has "an invincible sense of her own autonomy; she has a sense ... of the authority of her own experience" (Gilbert & Gubar (16). She has the imagination, the optimism, and the idealism to "look at a mud-puddle and see an ocean with ships" (138). Furthermore, in her youthful aspiration and introspection, "She had found a jewel down inside herself and she had wanted to walk where people could see her and gleam it around" (138). Those aspirations had been deflected by Nanny whom she came to hate. Both Logan

Killicks and Jody Starks had tried to humiliate and demoralize her, "crumple her feathers," and destroy her hopes.

Janie's widowhood releases her to rekindle the fire of her heroic quest and to assert the authority of her experience. Within the "expensive black folds" (136) of her mourning clothes " were resurrection and life" (137). The marriages she had entered with Logan Killicks and then with Jody Starks had stymied "her great journey to the horizon in search of *people*" (138). Hitherto she had been questing for *things*, which was indeed her grandmother's quest. Janie experiences an epiphany: She has been distracted by material gain and had abandoned her dream of horizon: "She had run off down a back road after *things*," forgetting that "No matter how far a person can go, the horizon is still way beyond you" (138).

Janie begins to live as a fully autonomous being who can now reignite the stymied quest of her youth. She would exchange her grandmother's "mudpuddle" for an "ocean with ships". Now she would shake off the "mis-love" she had experienced - from her grandmother, from Logan Killicks, and from Jody Starks. Janie is reborn, and her rebirth which validates her as a hero is analogous to the beginning of Creation, when "God had made The Man [humankind]. He made him out of the stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over" (138).

The men Janie had married were earthy creatures limited in their vision of possibility, lacking the glitter that would illuminate their lives, and hers. They lacked the venturesome spirit, and settled for predictability and relative permanence. As in the Creation story, man was tarnished, but he still "glittered and hummed" until his shine was covered with mud. Janie identifies herself with the destiny of humankind, trying valiantly to let the divine spark in her shine: "Like all the other tumbling mud-balls, Janie had tried to show her shine" (139). With profound imaginativeness, Janie figures the tumbling mud-ball of her life as the blossoming pear tree and the quest for the horizon.

A rich widow, Janie becomes a type of Penelope who resists the overtures of innumerable suitors eager to become her spouse and inherit Jody's wealth. However, she likes being alone and "the freedom feeling was fine" (139). She confides to her friend Pheoby, "Ah jus' loves dis freedom" (143). The potential suitors do not bring any experiences that she has not had with Logan Killicks and Jody Starks. These suitors cannot not offer her the transcendence she seeks, nor can they participate in her quest for the horizon. Her next spouse has to be someone who can understand her and intuit her desire for the horizon.

On their first encounter in her store, a jovial Tea Cake - Vergible Woods - the man who would become her next

husband, immediately does what the controlling Jody had prohibited. Tea Cake points out the fact that Janie was not at the ball game, and thus not a participant in the community activities. Then he rectifies a prohibition imposed by Jody Starks - he teaches her to play checkers. For Janie, this is a new experience: "Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play" (146). The consequence of this opening gambit by Tea Cake is that Janie gets "little thrills from everyone of his good points" (146).

As Hayes points out, "Of all the important people in Janie's life, only Tea Cake helps Janie discover and express who she is" (181). He mildly rebukes her for "never go[ing] to the lookin' glass and enjoy[ing] yo' eyes yo'self" (157) and encourages her to "have the nerve to say whut you mean" (165). Furthermore, as Hayes shows, "With his help she becomes reintegrated into society, participating in communal activities and developing her voice by joining in story-telling sessions" (181). He entertains her with his guitar, takes her fishing at midnight, and teaches her to drive - experiences which her previous husbands would not have considered.

Tea Cake's courtship of Janie who is older than he is, generates in her a fear of the disparity in their ages. She is so enamored of him that she is a little ashamed and timorous. Try as she may, "She couldn't make

him look just like any other man to her. He looked like the love thoughts of women" (161). Most significantly, however is that fact that for the first time she has encountered a male who "could be a bee to a blosson - a pear tree blossom in the spring" (my emphasis). He represents the fulfillment of the adolescent awakening she had experienced at sixteen. "He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God" (161). Hurston's laudation of Tea Cake represents a validation of him as a fitting consort for Janie.

Janie, as female hero, is suitably matched with Tea Cake for he is a free spirit who is confident in his manliness and secure in his manhood. He is a man who seizes the moment, and captivates Janie in a way that would be unthinkable to either Logan Killicks or Jody Starks, or any of the men in Eatonville. Because Tea Cake is confident in his masculinity, he has no reservations about demonstrating his love for her in ways that are not traditionally male. That he does so in a way that is feminine and nurturing action becomes a powerful and sensuous gesture of his affection. Janie is "lulled ... to soft slumber" (156) by Tea Cake's playing the piano and singing the blues. With charm and vivacity he initiates an eloquent and alluringly domestic act, one that bonds African-American women as they groom and adorn

each other's hair. Tea Cake combs Janie's hair and scratches dandruff from her scalp. He tells her, "Ah ain't been sleepin so good for more'n uh week cause Ah been wishin' so bad tuh git mah hands in yo' hair. It's so pretty. It feels jus' lak underneath a dove's wing next to mah face" (157).

Tea Cake's actions mirror his words, and unlike Janie's previous two husbands.' Tea Cake reveals Janie to herself; he becomes the mirror revealing to her the beauty that she did not know she had, a loveliness that was submerged in her relationships with her other spouses. When Pheoby, at the instigation of her husband, mildly castigates Janie for being too friendly with Tea Cake Woods, and for going to baseball games and hunting and fishing, Janie reminds her that being "classed off" in a higher crowd was Jody's idea, not hers. She remarks, "Ah always did want tuh git round uh whole heap, but Jody wouldn't 'low me tuh" (169).

In Tea Cake Vergible Woods, Janie finally finds a spouse who is eminently qualified to be the consort of the female hero: Tea Cake possesses the most important qualification of all her husbands - his willingness to be an equal partner and to accompany her to seek the horizon. He is more than willing to accompany her to the horizon for he is unencumbered by possessions; he owns no land and seeks no special gratification in social status. As the overbearing Hezekiah points out, "Dat long-legged

Tea Cake ain't got doodly squat" (156). Tea Cake's lack of resources disqualifies him in the eyes of the townspeople who view him as a predatory male who exploits widows and lonely women. As such, he is deemed unworthy of Mrs. Mayor Starks. The skeptical neighbors are concerned that Tea Cake is going to take advantage of her. Janie herself is tormented by recollections of the cautionary tale of Anne Tyler, a middle-aged woman whose thoughtless liaisons with young men in their teens and early twenties made her a laughingstock, and worst of all left her penniless. Annie Tyler "had waited all her life for something, and it had killed her when it found her" (179). Would the thing - the blossoming pear tree and the horizon - Janie waited for all her life be her undoing? Perhaps her recollection of the unhappy ending of Annie Tyler's exploits foreshadows a catastrophe for her. Nonetheless, she rationalizes her choice and accepts Tea Cake for who he is, the fulfillment of her adolescent daydream. Janie is newly enfranchised - she remarks to her friend Pheoby Watson "Ah jus loves dis freedom" (143) - and resists both categorization as a helpless widow with a fortune who must be in need of a husband, and as the inaccessible woman on the pedestal that Jody wanted her to be.

With a free-spirited and affectionate consort as companion and guide, Janie sets out, Odysseus-like, on her journey to the horizon. Tea Cake's relationship with

the female hero is amiable and equitable. She does not wish to be dominated and disparaged. Furthermore, he is not tied down to land, nor is he intimidated by women operating in the spheres that are viewed as masculine - fishing, playing checkers, and talking with the people in the town. He places no strictures on Janie; in fact he sees her as a full partner in his activities, even though some of these are questionable. In essence, he does not restrict her "intelligence and judgment to the realm of domesticity" (Polster, 5). So when he suggests that they do "somethin' crazy" and "go on de muck" where "Folks don't do nothin' down dere but make money and fun and foolishness" (192), she readily concurs. This will be a liberating experience, in a variety of ways in which "her soul crawled out from its hiding place" (192).

Marrying Tea Cake and going with him to the muck of the Everglades marks the culmination of her autonomy and the denouement of her quest. The "muck" is a place of descent, referred to as "down in de Everglades" or "down dere" even though the muck is located in Florida, the same locale of Janie's hometown, Eatonville. Its designation as a place that is remote and exotic gives it an ineluctable sense of distance and difference from the norm. Everything in the Everglades is big: "Big Lake Okechobee, big beans, big cane, big weeds, big everything" (193). Not only is everything larger than life in the Everglades, but it is prolific in its

richness: "Ground so rich that everything went wild ... Dirt roads so rich and black that half mile of it would fertilize a Kansas wheat field" (193).

The muck of the Everglades, a symbolic location, a geographical space that replicates the classical trope of the descent into the Underworld, is pivotal in the life of the hero, Janie Crawford-Killicks-Starks-Woods. The classical descent is always to a kind of Underworld, a place of discovery and profound learning from which the character eventually emerges with new perspectives, new insights with which to enlighten and embolden those who have not been destined to walk the path of the hero. Thus the descent into the 'Underworld' of the muck becomes a vehicle for the hero to "penetrate to some source of power" and to "precipitate a life-enhancing return to the world" (Campbell *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 30, 35). As Schein asserts, "The Underworld and [her] homeland, in their reference to each other, are the limits between which the journeyings take place" (121). The experiences Janie has and the lessons she learns in this descent enlarge her consciousness as an emotional being, and they compel her to be an active participant in shaping her destiny. Significantly, she looks death in the face not only during the hurricane, but also in the threat of her rabid husband, and she survives on both occasions.

As a female hero, Janie's unique quest for the horizon culminates in a two-phased descent into the Underworld that is symbolized and circumscribed by the muck. Janie's descent is different from the classical descent into the underworld because she goes accompanied by her husband, although her ascent from the muck will be solitary and as a widow. After all, marriage is the measure of her life, the beacon which guided her journey and measured her achievement.

Down in the muck, Janie abandons the stoicism and the silence she has maintained in the face of incidents that infuriate her and she gives voice to her emotions. "Janie learned what it felt like to be jealous" (203) which becomes a vehicle for expressing her voice. Jealousy is a new feeling for her, and it has its genesis in the fact that she was much older than Tea Cake. It is significant that none of her other husbands engendered this emotion in her, so she is unprepared for her own reaction at Tea Cake's indiscretion. So when Tea Cake flirts openly with Nunkie, and attempts love-making in the tall cane in the muck, Janie attacks both the girl and Tea Cake. On the contrary, when Jody had prevented her from making a speech at the opening ceremonies at his store, she retreated into silence. In the muck, she abandons the stoic response to those incidents that anger her; she becomes an emotional being. Finding her

womanhood, entails discovering and expressing the emotional and feminine side of her being.

In the locale of the muck, Janie discovers that she is an emotional being with a "strong sense of personal choice and effectiveness" (Polster 22). Janie, accustomed to the more genteel employment of working in the general store owned by Jody Starks, at the insistence of Tea Cake, goes to work picking beans in the muck. Although the work is physically more difficult, she discovers that "clerkin" in Jody's store was hard work, because there she was subordinate to Jody. In the muck she is an equal: "Heah, we ain't for nothin' tuh do but do our work and come home and love" (199). In the muck Janie learns to interact with the community, something she was denied in her marriage to Jody. At the end of the harvest, "Janie began to look around and see people and things she hadn't noticed during the season" (207). She extends the education of her sensibilities for she learns to love the music and the dances of the Bahaman who also worked in the muck. She also gets to know Mrs. Turner whose shop is an analog of Jody's with one significant difference - this time Janie is not an observer, she is a participant.

Janie's encounter with Mrs. Turner is another test of the hero's mettle and racial solidarity with the majority of the dark-skinned habitues of the muck. This test of the hero figure is such a serious one that

Hurston casts it in religious tones in which she expounds on the futility of worshipping false gods of shade and color variations. The context that gives rise to the discussion on the false deities of color has its origins in Mrs. Turner's valiant but futile attempt to establish a hierarchy of intra-ethnic distinctions based shade and skin color, an attempt to inculcate in Janie values which diminish "Negro-ness" and elevate "Caucasian-ness" (216). Janie is a light-skinned woman with a great rope of hair for whom color has not been an issue. Mrs. Turner would have Janie reject all who are not light-skinned and establish a coterie of the privileged.

Hurston is articulating a perspective about the relation of the hero figure to her community and the values it espouses. For Janie to be a truly heroic figure, she must rebuff Mrs. Turner's notions of who is a desirable African-American and must find common cause with all those who have shared the experience of racial oppression. Janie rejects Mrs. Turner's color-struck world and its value system and embraces those values which celebrate rather than denigrate "Negro-ness." Tea Cake reviles Mrs. Turner for her fanatical faith rebuking her for "mak[ing] God look so foolish - findin' fault wid everything He made" (217).

The reader is slowly and imperceptibly drawn into the mythic through a rendering of religious iconography which begins, seemingly incongruously, Hurston's

discussion of the fervidly color-conscious Mrs. Turner. Just before the catastrophic hurricane, the narrator intrudes on the text and extemporizes on the characteristics and attributes of deities and on the futility of worshipping false gods. In this oblique way, Hurston sets the scene for the dynamic intervention of a deity who seems interested in the affairs of humankind though this has not been evident in the text thus far. The context which gives rise to the discussion on deities is a strange one. Mrs. Turner tries to separate Janie from Tea Cake who, in her judgment, is too dark- skinned for someone like Janie. In so doing Mrs. Turner is seen as "building *altars* to the unattainable - Caucasian characteristics for all ... a *heaven* of straight-haired, tight-lipped, high-nose boned white *seraphs*" (21-216), a kind of racial void. Mrs. Turner's *gods* would "*smite* her, would hurl her from the *pinnacle* ... but she would not forsake his *altars*" (216). Hurston's language builds to a crescendo of religious terms: "*injured faith*", the "*mystery and mysteries that are the chores of gods*"; "*fanaticism*," "**the** *altars of her gods;*" "*the inner temple;*" Mrs. Turner hates Tea Cake for his "*defilement of her divinity*" intra-racial superiority base of shade(216).

Hurston is encoding a message here not only about the nature of deities and their relationship to humankind, but also about the relationship of the hero

figure to her community and to the social and religious values that it espouses. For Janie to be a truly heroic figure, she must rebuff Mrs. Turner's color-struck world and its value system and embrace those values which celebrate rather than denigrate "Negro-ness." In addition, Hurston is also framing a religious analogue for her protagonist and presenting her as a spiritual being.

The second phase of descent is the more profound for Janie finds herself confronting mythic and apocalyptic forces in the muck of the Everglades, forces which threaten her life and measure her fortitude as a female hero. deWeever (*Mythmaking and Metaphor*) posits that women novelists place at the center of their work "a theme that consciousness needs the dark in which to grow before it makes itself apparent" (171). The dark in which Janie's consciousness grows is both literal and figurative. It is the Muck which becomes literally a place of menace and well as a site of transition, a variation of Hades, in fact, an Underworld where she shares with those chosen heroes experiences from which they acquire profoundly life-altering knowledge. She will become like one risen from the dead.

To establish her protagonist as an authentic heroic figure, Hurston situates her squarely in a domain of the supernatural by transforming the muck into a mythic and hostile place and by a catalog of events which inexorably

shape her destiny. Janie has come to a "crossroads of consciousness" (de Weever, 168), the nexus of her quest for the transcendence of the horizon, but it is a transcendence that is achieved at great cost, as deWeever points out:

> The growth to consciousness lies as subtext beneath all the main characterization and the struggle to become human beings, to define oneself, and to create an authentic self produces an inner dislocation, which leaves its tracs either in mental illness or in physical illness has a price. Rarely does a novel end without the female hero having paid a price for her epiphany. (168)

Before Janie can accomplish the life-enhancing return to the world, she must first experience a horrifying and menacing apocalyptic force that turns the known benign universe into a kind of malignant Underworld which the hero must negotiate successfully, but at an enormous cost.

To reinforce the centrality of the religious values inherent in the African American tradition as forces that shape the female hero, Hurston's novel becomes a "preacherly text" with a fusion of African-American religious- and folk beliefs. The presence of a Supreme Being and an African-American eschatology combine to create a strong force late in the novel, and provide a

framework for the title of the novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

In the events leading up to the apocalyptic hurricane, there is a sense that Janie and the other human beings in the Everglades are experiencing a revelation that compels them to recognize and venerate the presence of the Supreme Being. As inhabitants of this Underworld, they are face to face with the god of the place, which unleashes his wrath on them, perhaps because as Hurston points out, "Through indiscriminate suffering men know fear and fear is the most divine emotion. It is the stones for altars and the beginning of wisdom" (215-216). Janie will experience series of events which will validate Hurston's pronouncement.

Janie is relieved that men have stopped their crap-shooting and acknowledges that, "Ole Massa is doing *His* work. Us oughta keep quiet" (235). It is a time of personal accountability, a time when they could no longer ask "the white folks what to look for through the door" (235). With no sacerdotal intermediary, invoking God, in what is a trenchant metonymy, ("Six eyes were watching God) (my emphasis) reduces the humans to a state of powerlessness as if they were disembodied - ghosts, wraiths except for their eyes.

Both Janie and Tea Cake, inexperienced in the ways of the Everglades, have ignored the warning signs of immminent disaster. They did not fear the fury of the

hurricane and the lake, and they ignored the explanations given her by various bands of Indians who could read the omens signalled in the blooming sawgrass. Janie, in fact, was given, but disregarded clear and unambiguous answers to the meaning of the unusual activity by the Seminole Indians, indigenous people who could read and respect the signs of the world in which they lived. With the portentous blooming of the sawgrass, the natural world seems to become animated. Thus, "dead day was creeping from bush to bush watching man" (229), and "That night the palm and banana trees began long distance talk with the rain" (230). The lake which has been dormant becomes "a senseless monster" who is beginning "to roll in his bed. Began to roll and complain like a peevish world on a grumble" (234).

The delay in leaving the threat posed by the impending cataclysmic hurricane enables a conversation in which Janie reassures Tea Cake that she has no regrets in coming to the Everglades and in not evacuating what has become a dangerous place. She affirms the sanctity of their love when she declares, "Ah'm wid mah husband in uh storm, dat's all" (235-6); "Ah wuz fumblin round and God opened de door" (236). This admission of the supreme contentment and satisfaction she had derived from her relationship with Tea Cake elicits from him a wonder and a tenderness that is a panegyric to their relationship: "Ah never *knowed* you wuz so satisfied wid me lak dat"

(236). This is the last time they will experience a period of gentle intimacy. In articulating the perfection of the relationship, Janie seems to have achieved the unattainable, and by giving voice to this perfection, has sown the seeds of destruction. Her whole life was spent trying to fulfill her larger than life aspirations, "the blossoming pear tree" and the "horizon." She has reached the horizon, but there is a huge price to pay. Tea Cake's words are interrupted, when the wind (almost as if insulted by the couple's fearlessness and their declarations of love in the face of the storm) coming back with triple fury extinguishes the light for the last time (236).

The focus shifts from the couple to the cosmic and the divine and to the powerlessness of the humans in the face of the awesome elemental forces. Hurston seems to be asserting that there is more to the horizon than satisfaction in marriage. Hubbard posits that "Janie's response to the flood is not simply intellectual; it is experiential and total. It is a religious response born out of her having come to terms with the impenetrable majesty of the divine" (176).

When Janie, Tea Cake, and Motor Boat surrender to their fear and decide to leave the shanty, the lake when it breaks through the levees, becomes a Noah's ark of animals seeking escape and a graveyard of dead humans and animals. Exhausted from swimming, Tea Cake is overcome

by weariness; in an effort to give him the protective cover of a piece of tar-paper roofing, Janie falls into the water and is threatened by a snarling dog. Tea Cake rescues her and kills the dog which menaces her, but not before he is bitten by the dog which had taken refuge on the back of a cow. Both Janie and Tea Cake survive the storm and eventually return to their home in the Everglades.

Following the events of the storm, Tea Cake becomes fatally ill with hydrophobia after being bitten by the dog. Janie nurses him tenderly, even seeking divine intervention, looking to God for a sign - "a star in the daytime...or the sun to shout, or even a mutter of thunder" (264). Although she survives the hurricane, it seems to Janie, at least, that some cosmic force had a hand in Tea Cake's death. During Tea Cake's illness, Janie looks at the sky to "somewhere up there beyond blue ether's bosom" where He (God) sat (264). She wonders whether "He was noticing what was going on ... He must be because He knew everything. Did He *mean* to do this thing to Tea Cake and her?" (264). The implied answer is in the affirmative.

In the throes of hydrophobia, Tea Cake imagines that Janie is having an liaison with Mrs. Turner's brother, and tries to shoot and kill her. When confronted with the ultimate test between love and personal survival, Janie experiences a prodigious fear, "a desperate fear

for her life" (273). Under the power of this emotion, when the choice was her life or Tea Cake's, the fear for her own survival impels Janie, in what for her "was the meanest moment of eternity" (273), to shoot and kill Tea Cake, the man who, for her was "the son of the Evening Sun" and who "had to die for loving her" (264). Hayes remarks that once again, "A man's ownership of a woman becomes an issue in this text, and Janie must protect herself from the ultimate abuse - death - by shooting Tea Cake in self-defense" (182). The experience awakens Janie to the limitations of love. As Hayes suggests, "Although she loves him surpassingly and would gladly sacrifice herself to save him, she is not willing to die at his hydrophobia-crazed hands for no reason" (182).

Tea Cake's murder, Janie's subsequent trial and acquittal, all of which occur in one day give the events the atmosphere of Greek tragedy, and seemingly fulfilling Aristotle's unities of time, place and action. Most importantly, though, the trial provides Janie with a forum from which to demonstrate that she has "learn[ed] the full power of her voice" (Hayes, 182). In hushed and eloquent tones, she tells the judge and the jury of the circumstances that led her to kill the man who for her was "the son of the Evening Sun" (281). Janie's performance, demonstrating pity, fear, anguish, and purgation, is a "tour de force. [Her] days of silence and subservience to patriarchal codes are finished

forever" (Hayes 182). A jury of twelve whites finds her innocent of murder and acquits her. Tea Cake is buried royally on "his white silken couch among the roses she had bought," with a band playing, and he goes like "a Pharaoh to his tomb" (281). Too grief stricken to care about her mourning clothes, Janie goes to his funeral in her overalls. Tea Cake, in death, is confirmed as an appropriate spouse for the hero/protagonist of the novel.

The element of cosmic intervention in her life authenticates Janie as hero. There is an impression that those with a sense of heroism, notably Janie and Tea Cake, are singled out for disaster. Janie and Tea Cake discover that the apocalyptic HIM-WITH-THE-SQUARE-TOES on his "pale white horse had galloped over waters and thundered over land" (249) and left countless dead in his wake.

Janie as hero, is asserting that her life is influenced by spiritual forces. Like many others, she is an immigrant to this place where she becomes an empowered human being, her empowerment achieved through suffering, as well as through self-affirmation. This cataclysmic experience is a major test from which she rises rather than sinks. While Janie does not experience an overt spiritual awakening, her experience in the muck of the Everglades allows her to walk the path of the hero, and to "take an active role in the search for deliverance;" it enables her to "find help along the arduous road and

to confront the basic ambiguity of the wilderness" (Dixon, 25). The muck as a variation of the wilderness is a place of discovery, empowerment and death. Janie has learned that the empowered human being has the option to participate or not in her own destiny.

Janie, as a female hero, shares with the great epic heroes, the accomplishment of the return home following the completion of the epic journey. Her return home is muted, as well it should, by the death of the man who in a real sense, was sacrificed for her. Janie takes with her from the muck only the package of garden seeds that Tea Cake has bought to plant" (283), her memories of him, and of the satisfaction that she has been to the horizon and back. Now she can do what the sitters-and-talkers back in Eatonville cannot - she can sit in her house and live by comparisons.

The newly returned, transformed Janie is willing to be "passed through the mouths" of the onlookers. She evinces the aura of the indefatigable returning hero - hair swinging and unraveling in the wind like a *plume; pugnacious* breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt; faded shirt and muddy overalls laid away by the onlookers as a weapon *against her strength* (my emphasis) (11). She is willing to recount her experiences to those who will concede that she has something valuable to impart to them. After all, she has "been a delegate to de big 'ssociation of life...De Grand Lodge, de big convention

of livin'" (18). Through her participation in the big convention of living, Janie has charted a course for herself. Her journey took personal courage and vision to complete, involving among other experiences, an encounter with the supernatural forces that shape the events of human life. In the odyssey that has been her life with three husbands, she has found that the individual is ultimately responsible for her destiny. As she tells Pheoby:

> It's uh known fact, Pheoby, you got to *go* there to *know* there. Yo' papa and yo mama and nobody else can't tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody's got to do fuh theyselves. They got to go tuh God, and they got tuh find about livin' fuh theyselves. (285)

Both Janie's heroic accomplishment in going to the horizon and back and Tea Cake's memory are kept alive as she returns home to tell their story and thus "endow their ephemeral lives with significance that transcends death" (Schein 7). When Janie returns from the muck of the Everglades to the town of Eatonville, she has become a substantially liberated woman. For one thing, she returns alone, having shot and killed the man who helped her on the path to self-fulfillment and risk taking. For another, she returns dressed in the overalls she wore in the muck during, what for her was the period of self-discovery and self-affirmation. That she is dressed in

men's overalls is the first criticism remarked on by the porch-sitters: "What she doin' coming back here in dem over-halls? Can't she find no dress to put on? Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in?" (10). The women who denounce Janie are porch-sitters, people whose lives have not been expanded or enriched because they have not had the discernment or imagination to think of a life beyond the porch. They await the novel, the adventurers, the seekers to pass by, and then from the safety of the porch, they pass judgment on the face of what they see with their limited vision. Their expectation is that Janie should return in the same guise in which she left wearing the blue satin dress she left in. To return in the same clothing in which she left, is to say that no transformation has occurred. What do they know? They have not left the safety of their porches.

Helen Washington, in a critique of Hurston's protagonist, "*I Love the Way Janie Crawford Left Her Husbands: Emergent Female Hero*," suggests that Hurston was uncomfortable with "the questing hero as woman" (106). Washington concedes that Hurston intended Janie to be such a hero: "She put Janie on the track of autonomy, self-realization, and independence. She allows her to put on the outward trappings of male power. Janie dresses in overalls, goes on the muck, learns to shoot" (106). Washington, argues, however, that Janie's life is governed by "patriarchal rules ... that deny them a role

outside the boundaries of patriarchy" (*"I Love the Way Janie Crawford Left Her Husbands* 106). The donning of male garb is mere tokenism. Mary Daly, on the other hand, in *Beyond God the Father* asserts that Janie's overalls confer on her a type of androgyny which negates "the basic crippling 'complementarity'" of the "false masculine/feminine polarity" (Daly, 26). Daly further contends that "Androgynous integrity and transformation will require that women cease to play the role of "complement" and struggle to stand alone as human beings" (26). Janie has tried to do both - to be the complement to her spouse while simultaneously seeking to maintain her autonomy. She has sought to "exorcise the patriarchal presence which carries with it feelings of guilt, inferiority, and self-hatred that extends to other women" (Daly 50).

As a type of the African-American female hero, Janie discovers that she has "that oldest human longing - self-revelation" (18), and that she has the language with which to articulate her thoughts and experiences. Furthermore, she has "done been tuh the horizon and back" and has made a profound discovery about life in marriage with love.

> Love ain't something lak uh grindstone dat's de same thing everywhere and do the same thing to everything it touch. Love is lak the sea. It's a moving thing ... it takes its shape from de shore

it meets, and it's different with every shore. (284) Because love is like the sea, Janie can be perceived as an intrepid voyager who has embarked on matrimonial voyages, each of which has shaped her life. In her first two marriages, she was becalmed in the doldrums of male dominance and male insecurity which trimmed her sails and dehumanized her. In her final marriage, she has found self-affirmation, contentment, and a discovery of the world outside the stultifying pursuit of materialism. She finds love and fulfillment in marriage and and most of all - her voice.

Hurston's protagonist, Janie, as a heroic figure has an interior life, which enables her to attempt to live an examined, introspective life. Janie intuits that life can be lived with poetry, beauty, and passion. Her quest is for "sweet things with her marriage" (143), "for the words of the trees and the wind" for fulfillment of a poetic and transcendent imagination (44). As a young girl, she often spoke to falling seeds: "Ah hope you fall on soft ground." As a falling seed, Janie ultimately falls on "soft ground" in her final marriage, appropriately to a man who owned the ways of finding joy in the world, but owned no land.

As a hero figure, Janie undertakes the hero's quest to live large in the circumstances in which she finds herself - an adolescent girl whose ideas are shaped by her elderly grandmother, newly freed from slavery. Janie

herself - an adolescent girl whose ideas are shaped by her elderly grandmother, newly freed from slavery. Janie originates and constructs for herself an idealism that is lived within the parameters of marriage. It is a state into which she is forced by her grandmother, who wants her to live a life that is better than her own. However, Nanny lacks a broad vision of possibilities. For the old woman, the defining experience for a woman is marriage, a marriage in which respectability and material possessions provide a *raison d'etre*. There was no "transcendental place" (Lukacs, 97) allotted to Janie's endeavor.

Hurston's heroine shares few of the characteristics of the classical heroes who are "guided along their paths by gods ... [and] if they were without divine help, they would be powerless in the face of mighty enemies" (Lukacs, 98). Janie is guided by her own vision of the blossoming pear tree and a marriage that would "compel love like the sun the day" (38). Janie is representative of those women who live out their lives on the scale that is governed by personal autonomy, and a poetic and transcendent imagination. They live large in the arenas in which they find themselves and define themselves in terms that they deem eloquent and dignified. And when they are confronted, as Janie is, by the consequences of supernatural and superhuman forces, these heroic women

find the strength to do the unthinkable, killing the things they love.

Janie's life goal was to find the horizon. Her journey took her to horizon, the realm of the infinite, but her dreams were not mocked to death (1). Instead they were fulfilled, but dream fulfillment is made of equal portions of "singing and sobbing and sighing" (286). The paradox contained in the opening paragraphs of the novel, "Women forget all those things they don't want remember, and remember everything they don't want forget" (1) is elucidated in the conclusion of the novel. Tea Cake's presence is almost palpable in the bedroom in Eatonville. His presence evokes two sets of memories - one that Janie wants to forget, "The day of the gun, and the bloody body, and the courthouse came and commenced to sing a sobbing sigh out of every corner of the room" (287). The other memory - the things she wants to remember - emanates from the same room and displaces the first set of memories. With this second set of memories "Tea Cake came prancing around where she was and *the song of the sigh* flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees." (My emphasis). The Tea Cake who occupies the room is the "Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course, he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she had finished feeling and thinking." Tea Cake is not dead for his presence is everywhere, "The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light

like a great fishnet," containing the catch of her great voyage, and with "So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see" (286). Only her soul, in the role of Watcher and familiar, can pass judgment on whether her dreams have been mocked to death by Time (1). Janie seems to say that she is answerable to no one else. Ultimately, this is the imprimatur of the truly autonomous being.

As a heroic figure, Janie struggles to shape her future to approximate as closely as possible the life she, with her limited experience and education, envisions. That she falls short of perfection, that her judgment is sometimes flawed, that some of her choices of husbands are seriously defective opens her to charges of inadequacy. What is at issue is the degree to which she asserts her own autonomy and takes responsibility for her destiny, rather than blames some greater power than herself for her failings. Taylor, *(The Narrative of Liberation)* articulates this issue as "the distinction between the principle of destiny and the principle of freedom. The hero of the novel is the center of indeterminacy; like the Christian who is free to sin, the hero is free to err" (20). In defending herself, she shoots and kills Tea Cake. The consequence of this action is that she has severed the link of the complementarity of the male-female nexus. She is complete as a woman alone. Janie has done precisely that

for by presenting herself as an autonomous being, "she has exorcised[ed] the internalized patriarchal presence, which carries with it feelings of guilt, inferiority, and self-hatred that extends to other women" (Daly 50). Her return at the end of the day, at the hour when the porch sitters are most conspicuous, affirms her new feelings of intrepidity and self-assurance that are the insignia of the hero.

Chapter 4: Centered, Sustained, and Restored to Proper Axis

Everybody is two beings: one lives and flourishes in the daylight and stands guard. The other being walks and howls at night.

Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*

Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;

William Wordsworth *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*

Paule Marshall's third novel, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), enacts the creation of an African-American female hero. The novel has as its protagonist, an aging widow who must resurrect, explore, and reconnect with people and values that shaped a past that she has ostensibly forgotten. Through the experiences of the protagonist, Avey/Avatara Johnson, Marshall constructs a heroic system in which she illuminates the persona of the female hero. In this configuration, the hero is predestined for the heroic role which is allied to the ideal of powerful cultural values. To that end, the protagonist has a mentoring precursor who prepares her protege for the responsibility of transmitting to posterity the heroic values of her culture. The hero, however, experiences displacement and isolation from the

heroic landscape and has to be rescued and reconnected to her mission through the propitious intervention of her ancestral guardian spirits.

Marshall inverts the odyssey as the voyage of the adventuresome hero, anxious to confront and conquer unknown adversaries, and constructs a work which could be characterized as anti-epic, anti-odyssey. Marshall's protagonist, Avey Johnson, does not want to undertake an odyssey of any sort and vigorously resists any action that will disturb the lethargy and the complacency that dominate her life.

That Avey Johnson was foreordained for the heroic life is indicated in the prophetic element that marked her birth. The young girl's birth and the circumstances of her naming are profoundly significant. Even before Avey was born, her mentor Great-Aunt Cuney, had sent word that the child would be a girl, and that she was to be named Avatara *(Praisesong for the Widow* 42). *Avatara* derives from Sanskrit and means literally, *an incarnation or embodiment*. Aunt Cuney's own grandmother had come to her granddaughter in a dream and had foretold the great-grandchild's birth. Great-Aunt Cuney had exulted, "It's my gran' done sent her. She's her little girl" (42). Thus an element of the oracular and a marking as *the chosen* surrounds the child's birth. Avey belongs in the tradition of *the elect,* individuals who are chosen whether or not they concur with the choice.

Having been foreordained heir apparent and curator of the traditions of the people of Tatem Island, Avatara undergoes a period of initiation and training under the tutelage of her great-aunt Cuney, the purveyor of the ancestral exploits of her people. The childhood activities which Marshall's protagonist, Avatara, shares with her great-aunt during annual visits as a young girl to Tatem Island, "just across from Beaufort, on the South Carolina Tidewater," serve as a period of indoctrination into ritual and cultural values that would ensure that the values the great-aunt treasures would be transmitted to the next generations through the agency of the young girl. Furthermore, the annual visits to her great-aunt are ultimately meant to provide a yardstick for measuring the efficacy of her life. It is against the backdrop of these childhood experiences that the worth of her life as an adult is being assessed.

Each summer for the first seven years of her life, Avey Johnson visited her great-aunt who took her on ceremonial walks to a proto-mythical place - Ibo Landing. The preparation for these walks had the majestic elements of the heraldic. The great-aunt "who resembled trees in her straight, large-boned mass and height" (32) would ceremoniously:

> Take the felt hat down and solemnly place it over her headtie and braids. With equal ceremony she

> would draw around her two belts ... one belt at the waist ... the other worn in the belief that it gave them extra strength strapped low around their hips like the belt for a sword or a gun holster (32).

With "studied ceremony," (32) the young girl would imitate her great-aunt, girding on her own imaginary belt and donning her own straw hat. Thus accoutred, great-aunt and child would set out for a ritual walk whose mystic power is reinforced by striding through a forest to their destination, the river, and a narrow spit of land "where the waters in and around Tatem met the sea... Ibo Landing." Great-aunt's brogans seem to be transformed to "seven-league boots," thus imbuing her with mythic power.

The destination of these walks is always the same: Ibo Landing. At Ibo Landing, Great-aunt Cuney would tell the child, Avatara, the mythic story of the captured Africans, their voyage across the Middle Passage, and their rejection of America. The Ibos in Great-Aunt Cuney's story lived through their odyssey and, in a heroic manner appropriate to the epic genre, realized a return home. She recounts the story that was transmitted to her by her grandmother, the story of the Africans' coming to America:

> Great big ol' ship with sails. And the minute those Ibos was brought on shore they just stopped, my gran' said, and taken a look around. A good

> long look. Not saying a word. Just studying the place real good. Just taking their time and studying on it. (37)

The old woman instructs the child that, "After what the Ibos saw in America, They just turned ... all of 'em ... they didn't bother getting back into the small boats drawed up here - boats take too much time ..." (38). With iron shackles fastened on their ankles and around their necks, the ancestors of Great-Aunt Cuney and of Avatara/Avey Johnson, nonetheless, turn back and walk across the river to the ocean and back to Africa.

Great-Aunt Cuney has assumed the role of mentor to the young girl - echoing the role of Mentor, who in classical Greek mothology is "Odysseus's trusted counselor under whose disguise Athena became the guardian and teacher of Telemachus" (*The American Heritage Dictionary*). The old woman's observations and stories are intended to be didactic. Great-Aunt Cuney summarizes for the young girl the meaning of the Africans' rejection of America, instilling in the child the importance of the power to see beyond the surface to the heart of things. She points out, "And they seen things that day you don't have the power to see. Cause those pure-born African was peoples my gran' said could see in more ways than one" (37). It is this lesson that the adult Avatara has forgotten.

Asserting her heroic role as guardian of the flame of memory and of the heroic traditions of her African ancestors, the newly married Avey and her husband Jay Johnson celebrate the Ibo Landing exploit. Clearly, Great-Aunt Cuney's training and the powerful story of the Ibos have retained considerable resonance for both Avey and her husband Jerome. The couple would spend their annual summer vacations, riding the bus to Tatem, "(changing to the Jim Crow seats in the rear once they reached Washington) and stay in the old house her great-aunt Cuney had left her" (115). The first year of their marriage, they made the pilgrimage to Tatem, and Avey walked her husband over to the Landing and, "Standing beside the river which the Ibos had crossed on foot on their way back home," she told him the "apocryphal tale" about how the Ibos had walked on water back to Africa (115). Each subsequent summer they had endured the Jim Crow bus ride "to visit the site of an unrecorded, uncanonized miracle" (136). Marshall's characterization of the story of Ibo Landing as an "apocryphal tale" and as an "uncanonized miracle" elevates it beyond the ordinary status of legend. The words have religious overtones and suggest elements of the mystic and the sacred. Tatem Landing is tantamount to a religious shrine of which Avatara is to be the protector and keeper. Two powerful ancestor figures had anointed her

avatar and custodian of the heroic tradition of their people.

As guardian of the flame of memory, Avey Johnson has become a severely lapsed devotee. As an adult with all the daily stresses and disappointments of married life, she has found it increasingly difficult to maintain the cultural ties to the past. She has become more and more removed from the values and events that connected her to her ancestors. She even finds it difficult to think of herself as "Avatara" or even "Avey":

> The woman to whom those names belonged had gone away, had been banished along with her feelings and passionsto some far-off place....The names 'Avey' and 'Avatara' were those of someone who was no longer present. (141)

Marriage to Jay Johnson usurped the training and mission that Great-Aunt Cuney's Avey's early indoctrination was intended to foster and instead reduced the core values of her life to the erotic. The sexual aspect of the marriage, with its evocations of images of Africa, became transformed into a substitute for the annual visit to Ibo Landing. In the early years of their marriage, Jay and Avey Johnson had developed their own "little private rituals and pleasures, the playfulness and wit of those early years, the host of feeling and passions that had defined them in a special way back then" (136). These vivid and affirming pleasures

included celebrating the Africanness of her body: "Her high-riding Bantu behind (Gullah gold her used to call it ... and the deep earth tones of her skin" (137). In their love-making, coitus seemed to Jay to be a form of worship in which he "found himself surrounded by a pantheon of the most ancient deities who had made their temple the tunneled darkness of his wife's flesh" (127). Later, as the wrenching demands of family and economic advancement dominated their lives, their love became "like a burden he wanted rid of. Like a leg-iron which slowed him in the course which he had set for himself" (129). The African music and poetry, "the praisesongs of a Sunday" which had sweetened their days had passed imperceptibly from their lives and no longer counted. Thus the rituals they invented to supplant the more durable and powerful ritual handed down by Great-aunt Cuney died as the marriage deteriorated.

The demands of culture are inexorable, and so it is that the ancestral figure of the great-aunt pursues the recalcitrant avatar and initiates the process by which she is reinstated and and reconnected to the mission which is part of her destiny. Avey is goaded to recollection and eventually to action by the intervention of the ancestor figure who has been pursuing her indefatigably. Avey Johnson has a "haint" which plagues her dreams at night and torments her days. Her tormenter is the ancestral spirit of her Great-aunt Cuney who is

her Great-aunt Cuney who is coercing her aging great-niece not only to take a final salvo at revitalizing and revivifying an otherwise unremarkable life but also to fulfill the destiny that she inherited - carrying on the traditions of the heroic Ibos of Tatem Landing. Instead, her vision is shaped by a middle class world that ignores the values that are African inspired. Seduced and overwhelmed by the struggle for upward mobility, she has neglected the commemoration of the heroic feats of her people.

Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, addresses the issue of the putative hero figure who does not answer the call to heroic adventure:

> Refusal of the summons converts the adventure into its negative. Walled in boredom, hard work, or "culture," the subject loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved. (59)

Avey Johnson has lost the power to center her life and to embark on a path that demonstrates that she can do what her counterpart, Janie does in Hurston's novel, and that is, she can seek transcendence and construct for herself, "a highway through the wilderness" (Hurston 32). Marshall's protagonist is immured in a predictable and deadening suburban existence which disengages her from the vitality of her ancestral bonds. It is therefore the mission of her guardian ancestor to reinstate her on the

path for which she was destined, and to save her from the death-in-life existence in which she finds herself.

The ancestor's intervention takes the form of a persistent dream which engenders feelings of discomfort, dread, and doom, and becomes the agency through which Avey Johnson is constrained, albeit reluctantly, to initiate a series of actions that will have monumental conseqeuences. She is impelled to recollect the past, and to recreate "what turns out to be a middle passage in reverse, a spiritual return to her African roots and the ritual healing of a self stunted by years of conformity and acquisition" (Jane Olmsted, "The Pull to Memory and the Language of Place in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* and *Praisesong for the Widow*" (249).

Avey Johnson's dream about her great-aunt has its genesis in "primal sympathy," the Wordsworthian concept which provides a vehicle for understanding the relationship between childhood experiences and adulthood. "Primal sympathy," according to Asraf H. A. Rushdy, is a way of engaging a phenomenal experience that has had a dramatic effect on the protagonist; it is an "understanding [of the ways in which] adult recollection faithfully reflects or neurotically constructs childhood activity" (*Rememory: Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels* 300). Furthermore, the recollection of the childhood activity is therapeutic for

the source of rehabilitation lies deeply buried in the mind of the protagonist. Memory therefore has to be goaded by a "prenatal divinity" which revives and rehabilitates the protagonist. The dream which troubles Avey Johnson and Great-aunt Cuney becomes a mechanism for beginning the process of the restoration and rehabilitation of the protagonist. Great-aunt Cuney "in implanting the story of the Ibos in her child's mind, ... has entrusted her with a mission she couldn't even name yet had felt duty-bound to fulfill" (Marshall 42). It has taken Avey Johnson years "to rid herself of the notion" (42). So it is with some degree of resentment and trepidation that she confronts the ancestor figure in her dream.

Bert States in the introduction to *The Dream and the Text* postulates that "the dream in literature always reaches toward a substratum of meaningfulness" (xvii). Peeling off the layers of meaning reveals several characteristics of the literary dream. One characteristic of the literary dream is its "purposiveness" (States xvii), that is the declared agenda that the dream seeks to activate. In the protagonist's case, the dream seeks to reconnect her to a forgotten past. Another characteristic of the literary dream is that it is always supernatural. The literary dream, according to States, points to the world around it telling us more than a true dream can. Using States's

assessment of the function of the dream, the meaning and significance of the dream which troubles the protagonist becomes apparent. So intense is the intrusion of the supernatural in the life and consciousness of the protagonist that she becomes physically as well as psychically distressed. To alleviate the distress she is feeling, Avey Johnson cuts short her trip and disembarks at the very next port of call.

In fact, the recurring dream which torments the protagonist becomes the agency by which she is led to the "odyssey" which in turn leads to her reclamation and self-affirmation. The dream sequence occurs in the middle of the ocean on a luxury cruise ship, the *Bianca Pride* (literally *White Pride*, the name suggesting racial exclusiveness), where Avey and her middle-aged friends share a "large deluxe cabin." Avey Johnson is so unsettled by the recurrent dream in which she is pursued by an ancestor figure she has not thought about in years, that her behavior becomes bizarre and incomprehensible to her cabin mates. Her panic seems inexplicable to Avey, "That her mind in a way wasn't even in her body, or for that matter, in the room" (10). She could not explain to her cabin mates the impulses that compelled her to abandon her cruise. In her dream and in the "dim rear of her mind, she had sensed her great-aunt still struggling to haul her off up the road" (47). Even awake, "her wrist retain[s] something of the pressure of the old

woman's iron grip" (47). The feeling of dread, which vaguely troubles her waking moments, is generated by someone about whom she has never dreamed before. There, however, in her dream, on the cruise ship *Bianca Pride*, is Great-aunt Cuney invading her sleep, "standing waiting for her on the road that led over to the Landing... motioning for her to come on the walk that had been a ritual with them" (32) during those long-forgotten Augusts.

In the dream, Great-aunt Cuney, dressed "in the field hat and the dress with the double belts" awaits her "on the road beside Shad Dawson's wood of cedar and oak" (40). At first pleading, "*Come/O will you come...?*" (42), then indignant at Avey's resistance, Great-aunt Cuney violently pulls the resisting Avey Johnson in a "locked silent tug-of-war" (43) which seems to go on for hours. The great-aunt retaliates in kind, trading blow for blow, for the fur stole - symbol of Avey's "hard-won life of the past thirty years" (45) - engenders in the old woman a violent rage that extends to the "spring suit, the silk blouse, the gloves" her great-niece wears. The clothes symbolize Avey's rejection of the traditions of her ancestors and a total investment in a way of life that lacks meaning and valiance.

The oneiric battle, containing all the elements of a combat, rages on all night between the furious Great-aunt and the resisting Avey. In the dream conflict each of

the women epitomizes and defends strong and contradictory cultural forces. The dream symbolizes the conflict between the middle class materialism that has engulfed Avey's life and the neglect of the ancestral values that Great-aunt Cuney sought to inculcate in her. The conflict highlights the internal strife raging in Avey and manifested in the dream, represents a struggle for Avey's compliance with the demands of her role ordained some fifty years earlier.

The adult Avey Johnson is a culturally neutered figure who has abandoned the name Avatara with its evocations of destiny, mission and ancestral and familial ties, and has assumed a name which has no cultural resonance. The aging widow is the picture of elegant middle class womanhood exemplified by the mink stole, silk suit, and gloves. An elegant woman, Avey is on the surface, the epitome of the socially mobile African-American woman who has escaped the poverty and the social claustrophobia of a Brooklyn ghetto. She is now a suburban matron who has raised assertive and independent daughters. In the dream conflict, Avey maintains her equilibrium until a wrenching movement by the great-aunt dislodges the mink stole draped over her arm. The mink stole, symbol of her hard-earned middle class status, lies in the dirt at their feet "like some furry creature from the nearby wood that had been wantonly slain and flung in the dirt at their feet" (44). The sight of her

fallen mink stole provokes in Avey Johnson an outraged cry and a vicious and violent attack on the old woman:

> The next moment, her outraged cry broke the silence, and she was raising her free hand, the fist tightly clenched, and bringing it down with all her force on the old woman. Wildly she rained blows on her face, her neck her shoulders and her great fallen breasts - striking flesh that had been too awesome for her to even touch as a child. (44)

In addition, the mature Avey has outgrown the stories the old woman filled the child's head with - "some far-fetched story of people walking on water" (42).

The occurrence of the dream on the cruise ship highlights another problem in the protagonist's life. The annual cruise has supplanted her long abandoned annual "pilgrimage" to Tatem. The cruise has become a formality for Avey and her friends, but it is a one whose meanings conflict with the rituals of Ibo Landing. The emptiness of the cruise and Avey's life is symbolized by the dessert - a parfait - which, she finds impossible to stomach at the end of the captain's dinner. Why she should be so repulsed by this elegant dessert is a conundrum to her friends who are already mystified by her strange behavior on this voyage. She could not enjoy the *Peach Parfait a la Versailles* (*parfait* literally means *perfect*) which was served at the end of the meal in the Versailles room. She and her two companions - in evening

gowns - are dining in the ship's Versailles Room surrounded by the formality and luxury of modern life: "Louis XIV decor and wealth of silver and crystal on the damask-covered tables" (46). One of her friends chose this setting, determined not to let "these white folks keep the best to themselves" (46). Versailles, as Avey's daughter, Marion, had noted perceptively prior to her mother's leaving, is "that infamous Hall of Mirrors" with "historical overtones of conquest and exploitation" of New World colonies, where "many treaties were signed ... divvying up India, the West Indies, the world" (47).

Avey has exchanged her own cultural inheritance and annual pilgrimage to Tatem Landing for an empty existence and a vacuous yearly cruise. She gazes into the mirror of her own life and sees there a woman whom she does not know: "She easily recognizes them both [her travelling companions] in the distant mirror. But for a long confused moment Avey Johnson could not place the woman in beige crepe de Chine and pearls seated with them" (48). In the course of her life, she has run aground on the shoals of an empty and pointless middle class life which has no room for the Ibo Landing story.

The mirror is representative of the protagonist's entrapment. As cited earlier, Gilbert and Gubar point out in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, that "To be caught trapped in a mirror ... is to be driven inward, obsessively studying self-images as if seeking a viable

self" (37). Avey Johnson is trapped not only literally at sea on the cruise ship, but also in the unfulfilled dreams she has for herself and those her ancestral spirit knows she should have. At age sixty-four, she has not found a viable self that is expressed in a satisfying life.

The dream, in which she battles her ancient ancestor and mentor, and her revulsion at the dessert motivate Avey Johnson to flight. Her action acquiesces to, rather than resists, her fears; it is passive rather than dynamic - the intent being one of escaping the confrontation with her ancestor by fleeing to the safety of her home in New York. The unintended consequence of her flight is that it removes her from the ship and creates the opportunity for the flight which will effect her rehabilitation and restoration.

Avey Johnson, therefore, reluctantly undertakes her journey to self-fulfillment only after the gentle oneiric pleadings of her ancestor fail to galvanize her to action and the outraged ancestor figure makes her great-niece's life intolerable. The extreme distress she experiences on the ship fails to arouse her to action. Neither do the night-time pleadings of her great-aunt move her: "*Come/Wont you come ... ? ... Come/Will you come ... ?*" (143). Avey Johnson remains silent and unmoved. The driving force is the ancestor figure who haunts her

dreams and her life to the point that she becomes physically ill.

As Keith Sandiford's thorough analysis of the novel, ("Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*: The Reluctant Heiress, or Whose Life it is Anyway?") points out, the sixty-four year old protagonist's (Avey Johnson's) life "does not in conventional characterization belong to the heroine" (372). Sandiford asserts that the novel's controlling order "extends beyond the visible manifestations of character and ritual." The controlling force in the novel is the protagonist's Great-Aunt Cuney who appears to her great-niece in a dream and compels her to interrupt an ocean cruise and engage in a quest which leads to cultural and personal fulfillment. So powerful are the influences exerted by the cultural forces represented by the dead great-aunt that she functions as a goddess figure in the text, benevolent but fervent. Great-Aunt Cuney's influence in compelling Avey to undertake her journey has an analogue in *The Odyssey*. Just as Odysseus' journey was guided and overseen by the goddess Athena, and initiated by the anger of Poseidon, so is Avey's odyssey goaded by a deity in the form of Great-aunt Cuney. The latter's modus operandi is to forcibly engage the reluctant hero in an antagonistic oneiric dialogue, whose outcome is restorative. The potency of Great-aunt Cuney in the novel lies in her capacity, through the

intervention of the dream, to act as "dispatcher, the agent who sends the hero on his quest" (*Dreaming and Storytelling* 95).

In an article, "Reading Yourself to Sleep," Rupprecht and Bulkley point out that "Dreams are inherently dialogical. They involve dialogues between consciousness and the unconscious, between individual and culture; between past, present, and future" (8). States asserts that these dialogical structures inherent in dreaming are utilitarian:

> [They] do not exist simply to create a narrative *about* the dreamer's problems and waking experience ... [they exist] to use the problems and experience to create a narrative, the narrative being the final cause, the problems and experience simply the material through which the narrative can be made.
>
> *Dreaming and Storytelling* (112)

In addition to the dialogic structure of literary dreams, Marshall's novel, *Praisesong for the Widow*, exhibits certain binary structures that are found in dreams and myths - inside/outside, male/female, inferior/superior, (States, 87) and my own inclusion, hero/non-hero. These paired structures allow movement from one state of consciousness to the next. Thus from being an outsider to whom the Carriacou Excursion and its attendant celebration of cultural connectedness are alien, the protagonist can move to being an insider, a

participant and acolyte who is culturally revivified. The protagonist becomes transformed into a hero who will finally fulfill her status as avatar. In only one pairing is a shift impossible, that defined by gender. These paired structures prefigure the protagonist's own disputation not only with herself, but also with the various ancestral and cultural representatives with whom she must engage firsthand in candid dialogue and unfeigned acknowledgment of cultural waywardness. Furthermore, as States points out, (95) the rehabilitation that the protagonist undergoes involves a cultural transformation that rekindles and reactivates the social and cultural values that center her life and are connected to the ancestors who miraculously walked on water. The ultimate change transforms her from passivity to activity, from non-hero to hero.

Once Avey Johnson acts to abandon her cruise, a measured transformation occurs that metamorphoses what began as a prosaic and soulless cruise into an odyssey, the defining and epic experience of her life. Avey Johnson's Caribbean cruise on the *Bianca Pride* becomes an odyssey in which the protagonist/hero experiences various trials and ordeals, as well as encounters with friendly deities, aggressive precursors, and mentors who assist her in finding her way home, to the "inner mansion" (Feder 401) of her being. The roots of her wholeness lie in a recognition that "Ancient history, myth and rite are

part of the 'inner mansion' of modern man; they are his perspective, his means of evaluating the 'aimless power' promoted by his own social and economic structure" (Feder, *Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry,* 401). Avey Johnson has neglected the rites that honor the *lares* and *penates* (the household gods) of her ancestors; she has not tended the fires of memory, nor has she memorialized her progenitors in dance; she has not even remembered the "nation" from which they, and she, came.

The quest of Marshall's protagonist encompasses not only the theme of the odyssey, the theme of "nostos" or the return home, but also the fusion of past and present which becomes a restorative of the hero's "proper axis" (*Praisesong* 12). Marshall's protagonist has lost her proper axis because she has veered off course in her life. To accomplish the return home, the African-American female hero figure (of whom Avey Johnson is a type) must dislodge the vapid routines of a floundering and lonely existence by recognizing the power and valence of the interconnections of the African past filtered, in Marshall's novel, through a Caribbean sensibility. The novel can be seen as emulating the genre of the odyssey, which celebrates not only the wanderings of the voyager, but more significantly, **the return home.** Avey Johnson is a voyager who is lost at sea; she can only find her way home if she changes the course of her journey, both literally and figuratively and undertakes an odyssey that

leads to cultural and spiritual reconnections, and ultimately to satisfying domesticity.

Unlike Janie, the protagonist in Hurston's, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, whose odyssey is figurative, Marshall's protagonist is literally on an ocean voyage. Thus the novel establishes the setting for an emulation of the genre of an odyssey, "re-formulating and re-accentuating" it (Bakhtin 5). Avey Johnson's cruise on the *Bianca Pride* thus becomes a vehicle for intitiating a journey of self-exploration and self-discovery, and a revival of and reconnection with cultural values that she had eschewed. Furthermore, the journey is one in which the initial voyage leads to a more profound experience in which the protagonist is rehabilitated and restored to psychic and cultural wholeness. Far from being a vehicle of escape, the *Bianca Pride* - possibly sailing on the very seas which had brought Avey Johnson's ancestors to New World slavery - becomes a middle passage to nowhere and a place from which she must seek escape.

Thus, driven by the sense of doom created by the dream of her great-aunt, she disembarks on the Caribbean island of Grenada, an island along with Carriacou, as Jane Olmsted ("The Pull of Memory" 249) points out, "located furthest east among the Caribbean islands, closest geographically to Africa." She arrives on the island on a day when some two hundred of the inhabitants - men, women, and children - in their Sunday best, are

preparing with great excitement to board all available craft to go on their annual pilgrimage to Carriacou island to celebrate their "nation." She learns from a taxi driver that the people on the wharf are from the tiny island of Carriacou; every year they organize a two- or three-day retreat, "The Carriacou Excursion," when they return to the island of their birth. Their lilting Patois - "just some African mix-up something" - is unintelligible to her, but somehow it reminds her of the way the people spoke in Tatem long ago (67). The memory of Tatem recalls her great-aunt, for "the vaguely familiar sound of the Patois might have resurrected Tatem and the old woman" (67) and the people of long ago. In the midst of this friendly and festive crowd, Avey Johnson tries to find a taxi to take her to a plane and on to New York. She is stymied in this effort and has to settle for an overnight stay at one of the island's hotels.

On the island, several fortuitous occurrences contrive to inititate her particular odyssey. For one, after registering at the hotel, she somehow finds herself standing at the beach in front of the hotel. She has divested herself of the trappings of American civilization - no makeup, flat shoes, and a creased linen dress - so much so that she is barely recognizable to the desk clerk who reminds her of her afternoon flight. Once on the beach, she "*drift[s] aimlessly* along, *indifferent*

to her surroundings, *unaware* (my emphasis) of the distance she was covering" (154). Her demeanor is that of a somnambulist, of someone being propelled by forces outside herself.

What all this reveals is that as a hero figure, Avey Johnson is reluctant to embark on the journey that ancient and powerful ancestral forces have ordained that she should undertake. She is a renitent hero who is not directed by her own volition. In a gradual and deliberate rebirth, some of the lethargy and passivity that overwhelm her disappear, and she seems transformed and energized: "Slowly she felt the caul over her mind lifting" (154). Lethargy is replaced by an energized curiosity and a sense of the newness of the familiar tropical landscape, the kind of countryside she had seen on innumerable cruises. Once again, however, there is the sense of an unconscious force motivating and leading her: "She was *unaware* of the blazing sun ...; she is suffused with a *look of wonder and awe* ... as *without realizing* (my emphasis) it, [she] drifted farther and farther up the beach" (155). She is engrossed by the appearance of a dead rainbow-colored fish and is oblivious of its stench. Later, she becomes aware of the heat and seeks a place of shelter from the blazing sun. She soon panics and, no longer aware of what she is doing, heads for a thatched hut near a "jumbled wall of rocks" (156). Dazed from heat and exhaustion, she

staggers by the hut and a hand reaches out and pulls her inside. The hand belongs to Lebert Joseph, an evocation of an ancestral figure whose mission is to guide Avey on the journey to self-discovery and reconnection to her celebrated history.

Marshall, who "has admitted to being an unabashed ancestor worshipper and has emphasized on numerous occasions the importance of historical roots in Africa" (Olmsted 249), introduces into her novel, relics of the powerful deities that originate in West Africa. Marshall is suggesting that "ancient sites, gods, and other mythical figures seem to be natural components of man's inner life" (Feder 372). Deities are not only part of man's inner life, but also key to the heroic journey to attain self-recognition. The journeyer invariably comes full circle to the place from which he began; for Odysseus it is Ithaca; for Avey Johnson, it is a figurative Africa which is located where ever people of African descent calibrate their lives to include the revering of their ancestral deities and heroes.

de Weever (*Mythmaking and Metaphor*) makes the point that the omission of the gods and goddesses from the pantheon of West African deities, and the focus on the "archetypes like Hera, Athena, Artemis ... acquired through education ... elevates such goddesses and denigrates through omission Eastern and New World personifications" (11). The ancient African deities who

are mythologized and are a component of Avey's Johnson's early life, and of the islanders of the Carriacou Excursion, manifest themselves in ways that demand recognition and obeisance. Lebert Joseph, the owner of the rum bar/beach hut into which the exhausted Avey Johnson stumbles and the man who rescues her, is the incarnation of one such deity. He is a Trans-Atlantic incarnation and evocation of the "archetypal messenger of the god, Legba the Fon" (de Weever 26). As messenger of the ancient West African deity, Lebert Joseph becomes the intermediary who guides Avey on the journey that will accomplish the realigning of the axis of her life and restore her to wholeness. deWeever asserts that, "The Black American writer ... revises and interweaves in her or his work African myth, particularly the myths of West Africa, the point of departure for most Americans of African descent" (26). As a Caribbean/African-American writer, Marshall incorporates into the novel myths and legends that survive in the Caribbean, thus celebrating the Caribbean connection to West African culture. She mythologizes the experience and in the process celebrates the remnants of traditions that have come down from Africa.

As an African-American female, Avey Johnson has lost contact with her roots and needs the assistance of "Great-Aunt Cuney and Lebert Joseph, both androgynous figures ... in her passage at the crossroad of her life"

(deWeever 126). In her childhood, Great-Aunt Cuney would put on her "dead husband's old brogans, which on her feet turned into seven-league boots" (*Praisesong* 33). She would seem transformed, as would the child who would "play a silent game of Take a Giant Step with herself: "*Avey Williams, you may take two giant steps*" (33). On Carriacou, Avey Johnson will be compelled to take the giant step that will lead her back to herself. The catalyst and guide is an old man whose seedy, run-down, dirt floor rum shop takes on the character of the "hushed tone of a temple or church" (159). In the presence of the brusque old man, Avey Johnson loses her New York assertiveness and becomes childlike and unlearned, "As if she were a schoolgirl again and he a teacher she disliked" (161).

Lebert Joseph educates Avey Johnson on the process as well as the responsibilites of being a worthy and heroic descendant of people who lived heroic lives in circumstances that were enormously difficult. In fact, he becomes her mentor and she his pupil. He explains the reason that his rum shop is closed for business this day: "*Come time for the excursion they close down everything and they gone" (162)*. The old man establishes himself as progenitor and patriarch born and bred in "Ti Morne, Carriacou. The oldest one still living from that part of the island if you please. Near everybody in Ti Morne ... call[s] [him] father or uncle or grandfather, granduncle

or great-grandfather or cousin or something" (163). In recounting his genealogy, the old man reminds Avey of "some Old Testament prophet chronicling the lineage of his tribe" (163). Furthermore, he explains in great detail the purpose of the Carriacou Excursion. One reason that the islanders from Carriacou return to the 'homeland' is to maintain a connection to the roots of community - "Family for one" (164). Another reason for the annual pilgrimage is to reaffirm their ties to the land for every man is "sure to have a piece of ground there he has to see" (164). The most important reason for the annual return, however, "Is the Old Parents ... The Long-time People. Each year this time they does look for us to come and give them their remembrance" (165). Failing to remember "the Long-time People," he admonishes, will vex them and cause nothing but trouble (165). To mollify as well as to celebrate the ancestral spirits, Lebert Joseph carries out a ritual offering of food and spirits and "Every year God send [he] holds a Big Drum for them" (165). The retelling is a variation of the acculturation she had experienced in her childhood walks with her great-aunt.

Lebert Joseph is also an agent, as it were, of Great-Aunt Cuney; he is "saving her [Avey's] psychic life" (de Weever, 135) thus enabling her to initiate the transformation that will change her from "reluctant heiress" (Sandiford) to active protagonist/hero. Lebert

Joseph is an integral part of the process of rescuing Avey from herself and preparing her for the pilgrimage to Carriacou that will result in her re-awakening, rehabilitation and restoration.

The Carriacou experience will replicate the Tatem Landing phenomenon. Avey Johnson, as inheritor and keeper of the flame of tradition and memory, has abandoned the ways of her ancestors: for decades, she had not seen, let alone, tended the land left her by her great-aunt ; she does not memorialize the Old Parents, or the Long-time People in any way; she has become so integrated in the ways of the white world - by dress and place of residence and by cultural adaptation that she does not recognize herself as the stylishly dressed woman she sees in mirrors. Neither has she passed on to her children the memories of her ancestors and theirs. Yet despite her failure to pass on cultural symbols of her African ancestry to her children, the ancestors seem to intervene in their own way primarily because there is no escaping the mandate implicit in her being chosen avatar. She has not been allowed to forget completely her destiny. Her daughter Marion, with no prompting from her mother, has independently established her own cultural links with Africa. This is evidenced by the cowrie shells and amber beads she always wears, and by the frequent trips she makes to West Africa.

Martin (*The Language of Heroes*) notes that the "heroic imperative [deriving from the *Iliad*] demands that a hero learn to be a "doer of deeds" and a speaker - not of words but of muthoi, "authoritative speech acts" (26). Avey has lost the authority which would empower her to perform the speech acts that celebrate her ancestry. Thus when Lebert Joseph asks probingly, "And what you is? ... What's your nation?" she misunderstands his question. She is unable to make the connection that as avatar, she early received the commission to perpetuate the heroic deeds of her ancestors, people from the Ibo nation who miraculously walked on water. Instead she misspeaks that she is from New York, a place that for Lebert Joseph, is the ultimate disconnect with the past. The old man is distraught that there are large numbers of his relatives in New York who have never been to a Big Drum, who know nothing "'bout the nation dance!" (168). She finds herself unburdening to the old man the events that led her to the hotel and subsequently to his ramshackle rum shop.

Her "confession" transforms the old man who suddenly seems oracular, conjuring up images of Apollo and the oracle of Delphi: "There was no thought or image no hidden turn of her mind he did not have access to" (171). Somehow he seems to know all the events of the previous three days, and particularly he seems to understand the agony she has endured, "the Gethsemane she had undergone"

the previous night. Lebert Joseph takes on the characteristics of a seer, also reminiscent of Teiresias, the blind prophet in *The Odyssey*, "possessed of ways of seeing that went beyond mere sight and ways of knowing that outstripped ordinary intelligence (*Li gain connaissance* in the dialect of Carriacou) and thus had no need for words" (172).

Marshall's naming of Lebert Joseph celebrates the presence of an African mythology in depicting the old man. Lebert's name echoes that of the Haitian deity Legba, who is a New World variant of the Yoruba god Elegbara (de Weever, 10). As de Weever points out, "Paule Marshall ... refers sparingly to both Western European myth and popular myth but creates myths of the people." Marshall's intent is to revive "the literary archetypes with different names [that] have been either suppressed or banished so thoroughly that only the Greek remains" (Bernal, *Black Athena* cited in de Weever 10). So while Lebert Joseph has echoes of figures from Greek mythology, he belongs more definitively in African mythology.

The presence of an African deity, de Weever continues, "points to the routes of transmission and indicates the tradition in which writer places herself" (10). Marshall's novel extols the centrality of the oral tradition in the culture of transplanted New World Africans. This is evident in the importance placed on

passing on the legend of the Ibo Landing phenomenon when the Africans walked back to their homeland. The story of Tatem is handed down from generation to generation and depends on each succeeding group for its survival.

Avey Johnson has been recalcitrant in passing on her great-aunt's story of the heroic Africans and must be made to revive the tradition. It is with this aim in view that she finds herself drinking an elixir of rum and coconut water. Each time she drinks, the old man gives "a little cryptic nod" and smiles faintly to himself, suggesting that he knows the drink will quiet her unease. Under the promptings of the old man, who tries to help her to identify her "nation," the African tribe from which she descended, she remembers the name "Juba," in its glory days, "the legendary city at the foot of the White Nile", now a forgotten backwater ... a place where lepers and goats freely roamed." In the old man's recollection, however, "from the memories that had come down to him in the blood; ... Juba [is] the once-proud, imperial seat at the heart of the equatoria" (178).

Memory and remembering are central to the rehabilitation of the protagonist to the status of hero. Her regeneration begins with the retrieval of the particle of memory that her ancestors were one proud indefatigable Africans who transcended human limitations. Avey Johnson is prepared for beginning the journey of self-discovery and reawakening and reconnection to her

ancestral past. After demolishing all her objections, the old man persuades her to accompany him on the excursion to Carriacou. Thus it is that at the very hour she should have been emplaning to New York, Avey Johnson finds herself back on the wharf, waiting in the milling crowd "like an obedient child" for her mentor and guide to return with passage to Carriacou.

The milling crowd and the color and pageantry remind her of movies of a Ghanaian durbar (a ceremonial gathering of chiefs and their followers and tribesmen/women) her daughter had made on her last trip to Ghana. Avey's memory of this event creates an arc connecting the New World celebration of remembrances of an illustrious past, with both the African past and the African present, where traditions are celebrated without the disruptions created by slavery. The mention of Africa also evokes memories of the infamous Middle Passage and anticipates a personal replication in a micro-version of the intensity and horror of that crossing.

Once passage on a boat is secured, Avey Johnson finds herself between two seemingly ageless women, "Old people who have the essentials to go on forever" (194). Ensconced between these women, Avey is freed once more from the trappings of her American civilization - "they relieved her of her suitcase, her pocketbook, and her hat" (194). There are several areas of convergence

between Avey's present and the past which she has so assiduously forgotten:

> The Patois and its odd cadence, its vivid music had reached into a closed-off corner of her mind to evoke the sound of the voices in Tatem. She hadn't even realized that a connection had been made, until two nights later when her great-aunt had appeared. (196)

The "middle passage" from Grenada to Carriacou also becomes a kind of descent into the Underworld, an essential part of the heroic experience. It is a trope which I have argued, is evident in Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, and in Hurston's work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In all three novels, the trope of the Underworld functions as a mechanism of taking the hero to the nadir of despair from which she is ultimatedly lifted. As in those novels, the intent of the descent is to teach the hero profound and extraordinary and momentous lessons. In Marshall's novel, the descent is achieved by Avey Johnson's recollection of an Easter sermon she attended as a young girl. Somehow she is transported back in time, and "Above the racing of the silken sea just below the railing [and] she soon began to hear - the sound reaching her clearly over the years - the imflammatory voice from the pulpit" (197). The preacher's voice of long ago recounts Christ's crucifixion, his descent into Hell after his death on the cross, and his subsequent

resurrection. The recurrence of this memory during the ordeal of the crossing, in which Avey is suffering both physically and psychologically, suggests that in the channel from Grenada to Carriacou, she is experiencing her own agony and Gethsemane. "Remember," the preacher's voice intones, "how He cried out at the end, 'Oh God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? - called on the Lord to deliver Him from the pain" (201).

So traumatizing is the transit that the cramped quarters of the deckhouse replicate the hold of a slave ship: "The bunk inside the deckhouse consisted of a shelf of planks built out from the wall ... the rest was darkness, a fetid heat and the airlessness of a hold" (208). To complete the simulation of the hold of a slave ship, (even though the old women reminiscent of the "presiding mothers of Mount Olivet" anchor her body as she retches agonizingly from seasickness), Avey Johnson has "the impression ... of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless dark" (209). Not only does she sense that other bodies crowd in on her, but she also feels that "a multitide ... lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she was" (209).

Something wonderfully cathartic occurs in this moment: Avey Johnson, like the Ancient Mariner, (whom Marshall later invokes - 255) from whose neck the albatross fell when he "blessed [living creatures]

unaware," forgets her own pain in the face of the immense suffering of the spirits/souls who shared the cramped space with her. It seems that in a variation of "primal sympathy," memory becomes the catalyst for redemption. A transformation occurs when she shows commiseration and solicitude for the greater suffering of those she imagined with her in the fetid and cramped hold. She has subjugated her own pain and concerns, and has focussed attention on the greater suffering of the Long-time People; unknowingly she has begun the "Beg Pardon." She emerges from her the descent into the "Underworld" with a powerful feeling of compassion for the suffering of those who, like the Ibos of Tatem Landing, experienced a type of crucifixion and a baptism by fire which marked their introduction to the New World.

On the island of Carriacou, Avey's rehabilitation and restoration to her proper axis is further advanced by the rituals carried out by Lebert Joseph's daughter, Rosalie Parvay. It is significant that Rosalie so resembles her father that she seems to have "sprung whole from his head, head-birth without benefit or need of a mother; an idea made flesh" (216). This characterization is reminiscent of the legendary birth of Athena, goddess of wisdom and the arts and handicrafts, who sprang from the thigh of Zeus. As an Athena figure, Rosalie Parvay is viewed as a nurturing and caring guardian, who tends Avey in much the same way that Athena watches over and

protects Odysseus (Michael N. Nagler, "Dread Goddess Revisited" Schein 147). Rosalie is an exemplar of the nurturing female who is knowledgeable of and conversant with the rituals of ancestor worship. Like Avey's great-aunt Cuney, Rosalie is "the curator of the community's mythology" (Dingledine, "Woman Can Walk on Water: Island, Myth, and Community, 203). It is she whom Avey Johnson must emulate on her return to the United States.

The rituals of laving, anointing, purifying, and feeding are symbols of Avey's restoration, and are the antithesis of the retching and self-pollution that she experienced on the crossing. Under the spell of Rosalie Parvat, she has shed the obsessive fear of being touched. When Avey remarks to the old man, "Your daughter has been putting me back together again," she is acknowledging that she is being rehabilitated. Thus cleansed literally and figuratively and in this new condition, she is prepared to be initiated in the rituals and dances of remembrance, contrition, and obeisance. In the clearing where the nation dances are performed, the aged and fragile old men and women celebrate their nation. To the looker-on, as Avey at times sees herself, the Big Drum should have been a disappointment - for the event is "the bare bones of a fete" (240). Nevertheless, in an epiphany, Avey realizes something important:

> The restraint and understatement in the dancing, which was not really even dancing, the deflected

> emotion in the voices were somehow right. It was the *essence* (my emphasis) of something rather than the thing itself she was witnessing ... the shadowy forms of long-ago dances and rum kegs for drums. The bare bones. The burnt-out ends. And they clung to them with a tenacity she suddenly oved in them and longed for in herself. (240)

Thus purified, Avey Johnson can initiate the performance that will certify her as a reclaimed hero figure and will enable her to satisfy one of the functions of the hero. This achievement will enable her to become belatedly, "her own author, performer in every sense" (Martin 90). In authoring her own life, she must excel at being a transmitter of the culture and values that celebrate her ancestors. To validate and authenticate her experience, a kind of metamorphosis occurs. The tall, big-boned maid, Milda, who has been commissioned to stay by Avey's side during the Big-Drum ceremony somehow changes into the tall and big-boned Great-Aunt Cuney. Echoing the experience of the great-aunt who decades earlier had violated the "Ring Shout" dance at Tatem, Milda sheds her maid's cap and moves into the circle of dancers. The woman's stride as she crosses the dance floor reminds Avey of her great-aunt "striding across the fields to the Landing" (242); somehow, Milda seems to have assumed the persona of Great-Aunt Cuney. Later when Avey joins the dance in the dusty yard, she

finds herself replicating the steps of the Ring Shout she had observed those decades ago in Tatem.

The Ring Shout is also the Carriacou Tramp, so she maintains the integrity of the dance she had observed so long ago:

> Not once did the soles of her feet leave the ground. Even when the Big Drum reached its height in a tumult of voices, drums and ringing iron ... her feet held to the restrained glide-and-stamp, the rhythmic trudge, the Carriacou Tramp, the shuffle designed to stay the course of history. (250)

Marshall is making a colossal claim for her protagonist when she declares that "the shuffle is designed to stay the course of history." The statement is an affirmation of the power implicit in the performance of a cultural artifact by a person in whose memory is enshrined the rhythms and expressions that can be reified and exhibited. Avey has, in fact, internalized the lessons taught by her great-aunt. In participating in the dance, Avatara Johnson has demonstrated that she belongs to a nation because "like the poetic performer [who has listened] to his elders [she] can repeat their phrases" (Martin *The Language of Heroes* 24).

Avey Johnson's performance of the vestiges of the ancient dances that the enslaved heroic Africans brought over the New World designates her one of the community of

the faithful. The dance performance inaugurates her into the fellowship of devotees who have been scrupulous in maintaining the rituals that celebrate and venerate their ancestral ties and heritage. She has made use of the genre available to her to actualize a memory, and to authenticate "a social act of self-presentation" (Martin 90). Clearly, the lessons taught so painstakingly by her great-aunt were not lost; they merely had to be excavated from the deep recesses of her memory. For her performance, she receives an extraordinary accolade. Lebert Joseph, with "a smile that was at once triumphant and fatherly ... bowed a profound, solemn bow that was like a genuflection" (250). This affirmation is followed by the recognition of several others who "tender in her direction, a deep reverential bow" (251).

One obeisance is particularly notable for it elevates her to the status of hero and confirms her atonement for the neglect of her ancestral traditions. The acknowledgement of a bearded old woman with cataract-dimmed eyes and androgynous mein generates especial notice. This representation of "An old woman who was at once an old man. Tiresias of the dried dugs" (251) is a powerfully evocative one, for it places Avey in the heroic tradition of those chosen to do great deeds under the auspices of venerable individuals. The old woman is both seer and prophet whose presence at the Big Drum authenticates Avey as a hero whose journey to greatness

is about to begin. The image of the old woman as Tiresias not only reinforces Avey's journey as an odyssey, but also ratifies the acceptance of her contrition through the Beg Pardon. Nagler points out that "Teiresias knows about guilt and atonement, curse and blessing" (Schein 145). Karl Reinhardt (The Adventures in the *Odyssey*, Schein 112) further observes that, "Blindness, misunderstanding, revelation through a seer, warning, atonement and promise ... are all integrated moments found in Teiresias's speech" as well as elsewhere in the *Odyssey*. (112). As seer, his words are oracular. Applied to his analogue in Marshall's novel, the blind old woman becomes an archetype of the seer whose gestures also are momentous. She has the second sight of those pure-born Africans of Ibo Landing who could see in more ways than one. The old woman sees enough to recognize the ancestral connection in Avey's performance.

Of enormous significance is the fact that at the height of a cultural celebration by a remnant of its practitioners, Marshall invokes a figure, Bercita Williams, the evocation of the blind seer, who asks Avey the pivotal question that Lebert Joseph had asked initially: "And who is you?" This time, Avey knows the answer: She is **Avatara, avatar.** Avey's performance and the accompanying honor by the elders of the Carriacou Big Drum gathering elevate her to the status of a hero whose

acts have been authenticated by those who are the bearers of the tradition. She will become her name, Avatara/avatar - bearer and practitioner of the traditions that memorialized her ancestors, a missionary for the restorative powers of the Excursion. Her first target will be the local taxi driver with his "mirror sunglasses and the straw cowboy hat" (emblems of a profound disconnect with his culture) who does not understand "*this excursion business*" (254). She will explain to him in her own way the significance of the annual excursion. She can do this because she is empowered: "She had felt centered and sustained, she would tell him, restored to her proper axis" (254).

Avey will carry out her own Beg Pardon, *Pa'done mwe*, to her three children. Like the Ancient Mariner she will stop passersby and tell them of the virtues of the Carriacou Excursion. Most importantly, she will revisit Tatem and restore the old house her great-aunt had left her. It will be a center for summer excursions for her grandchildren and for visitors. She will introduce them to Tatem and transmit to a new generation the story of the Landing and celebrate the miracle of the heroic Ibos who walked on water back their homeland, Africa.

Restored to wholeness and her proper axis, Avatara Johnson knows her name and reveres the celebrations that honor the memory of her ancestors. Word and deed become interwoven and she will then, in fact, "stay the course

of history" by teaching a new generation lessons that can only be taught by those who have been initiated in the mysteries of the power of cultural connection. As Martin points out, the ancient paradigms of the hero demanded that "a hero learn to be 'a doer of deeds' and a speaker - not of words, but of muthoi, 'authoritative speech-acts'" (*The Language of Heroes* 26). Avey Johnson has authored herself, and as such she can be called hero, for "Heroes are their own authors, peformers in every sense" (Martin 90).

Chapter 5: *Conclusion - Ain't I A Woman!*

> That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere ... Nobody ever helps me into carriages or over puddles or gives me the best place
> - *and ain't I a woman?*
> ... I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns ...
> - *and ain't I a woman?*
> ... I have borne thirteen children, and seen most of them sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me
> - *and ain't I a woman?*
>
> Sojourner Truth

Sethe, Janie Mae Crawford-Killicks-Starks-Woods, and Avey Johnson represent three different configurations of the African-American female hero. All are ordinary women who have transformed themselves and others around them by undertaking extraordinary ventures. Like Odysseus, they exist in times of social turmoil which propels their respective journeys. Each protagonist represents a seminal period of the African-American historical experience in America, and each represents a barrier to be surmounted in the quest for freedom. Sethe lives in the era of slavery and into the post-Emancipation period. Her life mirrors the turmoil and horrors of a period of conflict, brutality, and personal disenfranchisement. Sethe seeks escape from the dehumanizing world of slavery into an environment in which she can love her children without penalty. As a representative of the historic

period in which she lives, she demonstrates that she can survive physical and psychological torment and sustain values that challenge the oppressive culture in which she lives. A granddaughter of a former slave, Janie lives in the early years of the twentieth century. She exists during the period of the Great Negro Migration which lasted from 1900 to about 1930, when the African-Americans in the "largest movement of black bodies since slavery ... created a new 'African' culture within the United States of America" (Gates, "New Negroes, Migration, and Cultural Exchange" 17) and sought to divest themselves of the persistent degradation of slavery. She strives to throw off patriarchal domination and to live large in the sphere she has chosen for herself. Janie's quest for the unreachable horizon mirrors the search and desire of Avey Johnson who lives in the Civil Rights era, a period of nominal freedom. She struggles to "maintain a version of an African heritage in the path of encroaching Western values" (Davies 118). Marshall brings Avey to a full envisioning of the Ibo Landing myth and a recognition of the valiance of cultural tradition. Each protagonist overcomes seemingly insurmountable obstacles to liberate herself and to achieve personal triumph.

Morrison, Hurston, and Marshall demonstrate that although their protagonists ultimately triumph, "heroism has a bleak side - stained by death and pain and injury"

(Polster 139). All the protagonists have endured the deaths of their spouses, whether from the ravages of slavery, in self defense from the menace of a hydrophobic husband, or from the stresses of life devoted to escaping from the periphery of society. As survivors, whether of the legacy of American slavery or patriarchal domination, these female heroes evince a remarkable durability, and a capacity to ordain their own destinies in the face of impossible choices between commitment and autonomy, and between dignity and ignominy.

Morrison asserts that Sethe's killing of her child is a defence of her "best thing," her children, from the depredations of a dehumanizing slave system as well as a declaration of her commitment to their survival. By infanticide, Sethe proclaims her commitment to her children, her autonomy, and her dignity as a human being. She resists definition and classification as an animal, and in so doing subverts the claim that "definitions belong to the definers" (Aisenberg 210). While she endures her condition as a slave, she rejects that condition for her children. Sethe's journey is as a fugitive slave seeking the ownership of herself and her children.

The claims of motherhood and love lead Sethe into an odyssey which includes a descent into an Underworld of psychic pain from which she emerges scarred, but with the knowledge that mother love has its limitations. Not only

will Sethe have a future in which she is a friend of Paul D's mind (273), but she has undergone an epiphany in which we learns that she - not Beloved, not Denver, not the lost boys - is her "best thing" (273). She responds with an incredulous, "Me? Me?" but she does not deny the claim. Yet as Davies points out "Sethe's mother love and the painful past of enslavement she represents, never really is destroyed" (Davies, 137). However, with the intervention of the forgiving community of singing women, and more particularly, with the aid of a devoted Paul D, Sethe learns that she has a future: " ... me and you, we got more yesterday that anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (273). This affirmation of her worthiness as an individual empowers her and provides the route for her restoration to psychic wholeness.

Janie spurns the notion of having her individuality erased in her marriages, so she deserts one husband literally, and the other figuratively. Finally, she encounters a spouse who assists her in fulfilling her dream of the horizon. Weary of being reduced to an icon of respectability and privilege by her marriage to the richest and most powerful man in the town, she resists by withdrawing emotionally and psychologically from the relationship. Yet she maintains the viability of her goal of the horizon as a place of transcendence and self-fulfillment.

Marshall explores Avey's resistance to the cultural imperative that ordained her to be the transmitter of the heroic exploits of her African ancestors, a task designed to ensure "generational and cultural continuity through the stories and legends of her 'tribe'" (Wilentz, 4). Here, however, she is resisting something that the novel values; the movement of the novel is to enable her to overcome her own resistance. She must therefore overcome inertia and torpor and surrender the values of social and economic mobility in favor of the claims of ancestry. Her rejection of her role as *griot*, as the ordained historian and transmitter of the memory and exploits of her people is mitigated only when the protective ancestral figure intervenes. She is, as Sandiford points out a "reluctant heiress." However, once she is roused from her torpor, she assumes the attributes of the assertive hero, with the compulsive-obsessiveness of the Ancient Mariner. Like Samuel TayLor Coleridge's sailor in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" who atones for the crime of wanton slaying of an albatross, Avey Johnson will compensate for her years of neglecting her ancestral heritage with a new fervor and zeal. Like the Ancient Mariner, she has acquired a new "power of speech" to teach and inculcate in others the beauty her ancestral heritage.

Morrison, Hurston and Marshall create female protagonists who embark on journeys that are the insignia

of the hero figure. Each journey presents a distinct challenge, determined in great part by the milieu in which the protagonist lives. Morrison uses Sethe's journey to explore the pernicious effects of slavery on a mother who is willing to accept much of the brutality of the slave system but not its dehumanizing character, especially when the dehumanization involves her children.

Sethe's journey as a pregnant young slave woman whose escape from a debilitating world, and an Edenic wilderness tests the most intrepid of heroes. But the escape from the world of slavery leads her to commit infanticide. She escapes one world only to descend into another more pernicious realm in which home becomes transformed into the Underworld inhabited by the avenging ghost of the murdered child. The reconciliation that Sethe attempts is so full of the fury of the dead child's ghost, that at times Beloved seems to be an incarnation of one of the Furies traditionally associated with the female archetypes of power and possession. Sethe is tested to the very limits of her sanity trying to appease the rage of her murdered child. Ultimately, Sethe is restored to wholeness when she relinquishes her claim on the child as the best part of herself.

In constructing the figure of Janie as a hero, Zora Neale Hurston is "restructuring society and imposing upon it her peculiar vision of the world, a world in which a black woman, seared by the fires of race and gender can

emerge with her creative spirit intact" (Bobb 1). Hurston fashions Janie's journey as a quest for the seemingly unattainable horizon, and as the culmination of a pubescent girl's search for transcendence in her marriages. In the process the hero creates for herself a dream of freedom - "a highway through the wilderness" - and fulfills her own objective of finding about living for herself. Hurston directs Janie's intention in her marriages toward herself, rather than toward her husbands. Janie wants a partner who can help her to live out the dreams she has for herself in her marriage, one who can help her "take a stand on high ground" (32) and "help her look upon herself" (37) with the gaze of love and admiration rather than the gaze of loathing and condemnation. That she should persist in this venture is a tribute to her tenacity and spiritedness and to the integrity of her vision.

Marshall transforms Avey's journey, which begins as a self-indulgent Caribbean cruise, into a pilgrimage. The pilgrimage becomes the locus for her protagonist's reconnection with the diasporic experience of her African ancestors. In the process, Avey undergoes a transformation and relinquishes her acquired middle class suburban values. As Wilentz points out, she "comes to accept her own cultural heritage, hidden for years by the hegemony of mainstream cultural values and the ironic pressure to assimilate into a restrictive society" (7).

At the end of the journey, Avey becomes a crusader for the restorative power of excursions into celebrations of ancestral memory; she has been centered sustained and restored to her proper axis.

In the course of their protagonists' heroic journeys of self-discovery, Morrison, Hurston and Marshall ordain that their heroes descend into a permutation of the classical trope of the Underworld, each Underworld being differently configured. The difference in each configuration lies in the nature and purpose of the discovery that each woman makes. For Sethe, the Underworld is the house at 124 Bluestone Road thus transformed by the presence of the resurrected ghost child. Sethe's Underworld is powerfully evocative for it replicates and scrutinizes the perilous world of the slave system, while it problematizes the monumental task of thinking and imaging the unspeakable nature of slavery.

Morrison uses the descent into the Underworld not only to resurrect the ghost of the dead child Beloved, but also to reveal the horrors, the agonies, and the terrors of a slave system in which Sethe, a heroic slave mother tries to do the unthinkable - love her children as if they belonged to her and should belong to her. Morrison, in this novel and through the persona of Sethe, provides the "words to say it" (*playing in the dark* v), that is to say, a way to enter the "disrupting darkness"

of the experience of slavery and to demonstrate that the experience, however psychically damaging, did not annihilate all the victims, and that some found the power to resist as best they could.

Beloved's ascent from the world of the dead transforms Sethe's home into Hell which vanishes only when the outside world comes in to exorcise the ghost whose presence plagues her mother. Despite the humiliation of enslavement, this time by the ghost of her murdered child, Sethe maintains "the best thing she was, was her children" (251) for they offered the possibility of transcendence and ultimately the escape from the brand which was the her destiny as well as her mother's. She discovers, too, that the living cannot coexist with the dead, for to do so is to surrender the exigencies of the present to the claims of history and memory.

Hurston's construction of Janie's descent into the Underworld is unique, for her protagonist goes accompanied by her third husband. Janie's descent is to a place which is geographically configured as a symbolic space(as it the case with all the protagonists' descent). It is a place which initially presents itself as a locale of liveliness and irrepressible merriment. However, it reserves its menace for the habitues who do not understand its codes, and must discover through loss, that there is a Divinity that rules the place. The protagonist's encounter with the primordial forces of the

Underworld tests her power to ordain herself and educes from her the response that she is author of her own destiny.

Marshall's protagonist, like Morrison's and Hurston's, also experiences a descent into an Underworld, an experience which becomes pivotal to Avey's transformation. The locale that functions as the Underworld in this novel, is the hold of the schooner, the *Emmanuel C*, the name itself reverberating with religious and mystical overtones: *Emmanuel* means "God with us" and the initial *C* likely represents "Christ." It is not surprising, therefore, that the small hold of this rickety boat becomes a place of rediscovery of the power, a conflation of the "inflammatory voice from the pulpit" of her childhood, and a place of connectedness with the some of the legions of Africans who experienced their own Underworld descent via the notorious Middle Passage.

Morrison, Hurston, Marshall incorporate the trope of the Middle Passage in their novels. These authors use the trope to symbolize the transforming power of this experience in the lives of their protagonists. The Middle Passage is both the literal and figurative conduit of the African to the American and the genesis of the African-American. The Middle Passage invocation is, therefore, a concomitant of the experience of slavery

which shaped the African-American literary imagination. Mary Helen Washington, in an "Afterword" to Marshall's novel, *Browngirl, Brownstones*, indicates that the significance of the Middle Passage experience lies in the fact that "the women whose lives and traditions were forever changed by the Middle Passage emerge ... as central figures ... determined to order the meaning of their past and to find in their spiritual strivings the means to construct a future" (324). As exemplars of African-American female heroes, Sethe, Janie, and Avey differ in significant ways from the Odysseus-model hero. For one, when Odysseus leaves home, he is self-defined and autonomous, the king whose return home is certain, because his territory is patrimonial. His wife Penelope remains faithful, fending off suitors, and loyally awaits the return of her husband from his wanderings. Furthermore, the *Odyssey* belongs in the tradition in which the poet joyfully sings the hero's return home. Like Homer, Morrison, Hurston, and Marshall, construct heroes whose ultimate return home is assured. However, the songs the African-American authors raise for their female heroes contain "haunting echoes" of "sorrow songs" (Du Bois 284) nuanced with pain, loss, humiliation, exile, but exalted by the triumph of the return to home. There is power in the song to accomplish the return home as evidenced in the thirty singing women, whose voices building like waves of sound, rid Sethe of the predatory

ghost child and recreate the possibility of home. For Janie, the return home is accomplished when she is widowed, and her husband's funderl is a dirge. Avey Johnson's home-coming must be preceded by the sound of tbe Beg Pardon both to her ancestors and to her children.

For these African-American female writers, "home" is often a problematic place. Davies posits the view that, "Home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it. Still home is a contradictory, contested space, a locus for misrecognition and alienation" (113). For each of their protagonists, home is dominated by spouses or other authority figures, and becomes a place in which she is alienated or in some way dispossessed.

Morrison locates her protagonist, Sethe, in the ironic Edenic Sweet Home, which is nominally also a place of death and dehumanization. Sethe's second home at 124 Bluestone Road becomes a perversion of home. It is a place from which she declares she will run no more, but it is also a place which the ghost child makes uninhabitable except to those who are willing to tolerate the havoc it creates. Its location on the outskirts of the city is symbolic of her marginalization in the society in which she lives. Not until the ghost child is banished does Sethe's house become home. Only then does her mind which was 'homeless' experience the normalcy associated with home. Part of the process of

reconciliation and re-establishment of home occurs when the estrangement of the community of ex-slaves is assuaged, and a rapprochement occurs between Sethe and the community.

For Hurston's heroine, Janie, her first home is linked to a type of marginalization, for home is "the white folks backyard" (22). To avoid the crumpled feathers and the bowed head of humiliation of living in the Washburns backyard, Nanny buys land and a house, which provide shelter and a measure of security. Janie's subsequent homes are places dominated by men. Killicks house, already paid for, is fully furnished, with among other things, the "onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks" in the parlor (41). Home, however, is nothing more than material possessions, for Janie is not attracted physically or emotionally to Killicks; on the contrary, she is repulsed by him. The home Jody Starks provides is a "big house" - "two stories with porches, with bannisters and such things and painted white" - comparable to "the kind of promenading white that Bishop Whipple, W. B. Jackson and the Vanderpools wore" (75). After several years, with Jody's systematic efforts to silence her, Janie, alienated from her husband, becomes so weary resisting his efforts to suppress her voice that she retreats into silence. Home becomes a sterile place for the "spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor" (111) symbolized by the image of

the Virgin Mary which replaces the reality of a marriage in which the bed was a "daisy-field for her and Joe to play in." Thus she disconnects physically and and emotionally from Jody and home becomes a sterile, loveless place. Following her marriage, to Tea Cake Woods, Janie never has a proper house of the type Killicks and Starks provided. With Tea Cake, she lacks a house but has a home. She lives contentedly and joyfully in Tea Cake's rented room in Jacksonville, and later in the shack provided for migrant workers in the Everglades. Reflecting on the old days in Jody's big white house made Janie laugh. In this new place in the muck, home is a happy place where she could "listen and laugh and even talk" if she chose to. She even becomes proficient at "telling big stories herself" (200).

Marshall's Avey Johnson sees the fulfillment of the American Dream as the ostensibly the realization of home. Moving from the ghetto of Halsey Street in Brooklyn to the desirable suburb of North White Plains should have been satisfying, but the transition is achieved at great cost. The marriage with Jay Johnson collapses even as they become more prosperous and more socially integrated into middle class suburban life. Furthermore, she rejects the validity of the great social transformations that were changing the nation in her repudiation of the protest by African-Americans in Watts and Detroit, as well as in her disparagement of her daughter Marion's

participation in the Poor People's March on Washington. By distancing herself from the struggles of her people, she creates an estrangement from which she emerges with a fractured and alienated home.

All the protagonists experience the return home, with its implied extolment of harmonious domesticity. Ultimately the goal of the odyssey is not the wandering, but the return to the safety and security home.

Morrison orchestrates Sethe's return home as a release from a horrifying and debilitating ordeal, from a confronta-tion with the remorse of a crime committed in the name of protective, maternal love. Hers is a return from the guilt which enabled the depredations of the ghost child and later those of the resurrected Beloved. Sethe's return and rehabilitation is assisted by her daughter Denver, who seeks escape from her mother's wearying preoccupation with her resurrected sister. Denver summons help from women in the community and particularly from Lady Jones who represents the empowerment derived through education. Sethe's return to the community of the ex-slaves is emblematic of the return from the consequences of her exhumation of the pain of slavery and the consequences of her actions.

The post-survival individual that Sethe will become is different - she has faced the demons, and though battered and bruised emotionally and psychically, she is not annihilated; she has told her story, and with the

power of the singing women in her community, "a hill of black people," she has assuaged the fury of her murdered child, and exorcised the ghosts of memory. The exorcism works, and the child who was "disremembered and unaccounted for" slowly vanishes from the collective memory of the people in a kind of cultural amnesia for "remembering seemed unwise" (Morrison, 274). Nevertheless, like the experience of slavery, whose emblem Beloved is, there can be no total forgetfulness - the footprints are too deeply embedded and fossilized, the memory too persistent and too painful to disappear entirely. There are vestiges of her presence: "Her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit" (275).

Hurston constructs Janie's return so that it carries with it an indomitable sense of triumph. For Janie the return is at the end of the day - the time of sitting on porches, a time when the entire community could witness her return. The impact of her return on the judgmental community of viewers is electric in part because she returns in overalls which confers on her a form of androgyny which emphasizes her femininity. As Daly points out, a sexist society invariably blames the victim. She asserts that:

> The healing process demands a reaching out toward completeness of human being in the members of both

> sexes - that is, movement toward androgynous being. For women, this means exorcism of the internalized patriarchal presence, which carries with it feelings of guilt, inferiority, and self-hatred that extends itself to other women. (50)

The heroic Janie has been to the horizon; she has been rejuvenated, and has recreated herself. Pheoby remarks, "Gal, you sho looks *good*. You looks like youse yo' own daughter" (14). Ironically, it is when Janie comes into womanhood that she more resembles a young girl. Janie's return engenders an envious and critical retrospective of her life and her doings, by the porch sitters who are in the same place in which she left them; nothing much has changed in their lives. Janie disables them temporarily when she greets them politely but denies them the pleasure of satisfying their curiosity about the details of her life since she left with Tea Cake. When her best friend, Pheoby Watson, joins her after performing the rituals of greeting and hospitality, Janie relates the details of her journey, tells her story, thus fulfilling "that oldest human longing - self revelation" (18).

Marshall's protagonist returns from a "spiritual Middle Passage" (Wilentz 19) as a transformed figure. Avey Johnson is literally and symbolically a messenger bringing back to her homeland current news (in the

letters she will mail to the children of her spiritual mentors) as well as ancestral knowledge of her "nation." The cultural awakening she has undergone in the Caribbean will ignite the fires of memory not only in her progeny, but also in the minds and hearts of those who are seduced by the allure of economic advancement and forget to celebrate their heritage. She will honor the memory of her ancestors and particularly the memory of Great-aunt Cuney, and she will venerate her own name and destiny as Avatara.

George Eliot, in a fictional memoir, *The Lifted Veil*, points out the perils of seeing into the future, cautions about "bitterness and isolation, the ferment of a soul which can find no home in the world, the hopeless sense that we can never represent ourselves and other correctly" (Jennifer Uglow, *George Eliot* 115). These words which refer to Eliot's story come from a radically different time and place, but they are apt in describing Morrison's novel, which lifts the veil on the past rather than on the future as Eliot's memoir does.

Ripping the veil from the past is an act of violence which reveals horror, despair, madness, and best of all glimpses of heroism. Furthermore, Morrison, Hurston and Marshall seem to deconstruct Du Bois's paradigm of the "Negro [as] a sort of seventh son born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world" (*The Souls of Black Folk* 45). Morrison is lifting the veil on

the African-American female and is revealing both the futility and the necessity of trying to recapture and to represent ourselves through a reclaiming of the past. Morrison's narrative persona declares repeatedly and enigmatically, "This is not a story to pass on." By virtue of the existence of the novel, however, the story is passed on. As Morrison herself has asserted, the African-American writer has an enormous responsibility to history to "rip the veil" that has shrouded this crucible of the African-American experience.

In fashioning Sethe, Janie, and Avey as types of African-American female heroism out of the fragments of history and memory and imagination, Hurston, Marshall, and Morrison are explicating the claim that the hero's action, in addition to being personal, reflects the destiny of a community. Sethe's descent and Beloved's ascent from the horrifying Underworld that American slavery constituted for people of African ancestry is a catharsis; it mitigates the universal pain that may otherwise emanate from every "house in the country ... packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (5). The universality of "Negro grief" is emblematized in the figure of the slave mother, Sethe. Her story resonates into significance for "a great organic complex, a nation or a family" (Lukacs 67). Janie's insistence on transcendence in her marriages is an inspiration to the community of women, exemplified by Pheoby, whose lives

need the laughing, loving example of Janie and Tea Cake's marriage (Lowe, 194). Avey Johnson, a sixty-four year old widow, discovers the power of the past and its rituals in shaping and sustaining the present.

If as Gross argues, "Literary heroes dramatize the moral texture of a nation" (*v*), then figures like Sethe, Janie, and Avey enable a conversation on and a scrutiny of unspeakable acts and their unspeakable consequences that are part of the heritage of the American nation. *Beloved, Their Eyes Were Watching God,* and *Praisesong for the Widow* represent their writers' efforts to reinscribe a meaning to the *locus classicus* that is the African-American literary landscape. These authors seem to say that their heroes have plumbed the depths of slavery, patriarchy, and cultural malaise and their protagonists have emerged with a heightened awareness of the power of self-knowledge and self-fulfillment. The African-American experience includes shame, despair, and death. Yet however troubled and painful, the experience has been a triumph, for each of the female protagonists has a story that in epic tradition is *mirabile dictu* - wonderful to relate.

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