

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Zora Neale Hurston was a Black American writer during the period of the Harlem Renaissance. The purpose of this study is to show that three of her four novels form a protracted discussion of a particular type of freedom which was of especial interest to Hurston. The study seeks to demonstrate that Hurston believed that a person must be free within his own soul before he could enjoy the advantages offered through legal freedoms. In fact, this study will propose and demonstrate Hurston's belief that the importance of soul freedom supercedes any other kind of freedom and that the person who is free in his soul will neither subjugate another nor allow his soul to be subjugated by another.

Hurston's novels Their Eyes Were Watching God, Moses, Man of the Mountain, and Seraph on the Suwanee all support the above hypotheses. Hurston's autobiography and essays also provide evidence for this stance.

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Zora Neale Hurston:  
Freedom from the Inside Out

by

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ZORA NEALE HURSTON:  
FREEDOM FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Introduction

"To me, bitterness is the underarm odor of wishful weakness. It is the graceless acknowledgement of defeat" (Dust 280).

In her last three novels, Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), Moses, Man of the Mountain (1939), and Seraph on the Suwanee (1948), Zora Neale Hurston makes a case for human freedom. She is not talking about the freedom of Blacks only, but of human freedom in general. Hurston is interested in the psychology of enslavement. What, she might ask, is it that enslaves us in our towns and in our relationships, in our cultures and in our families. She is concerned with that which makes a person and a society truly free. True freedom to Hurston is not an external freedom, the kind that laws proclaim, but instead, an internal sort of freedom, a freedom attainable only through self-knowledge. This Hurston kind of freedom, this self-knowledge, I will label "soul-freedom." Hurston, in all three novels, argues that the success of human relationships, whether they be intimate or on a national scale, depends on this sort of freedom.

The following discussion will first deal with the two narratives that treat an individual's quest for soul freedom, the story of Janie in Their Eyes Were Watching God, and the story of Arvay in Seraph on the Suwanee. The closing essay will examine Hurston's consideration of the way in which the freedom of a nation depends on the soul freedom of its individual members. Through Moses, Man of the Mountain, Hurston makes clear the elusive nature of freedom. By retelling the story of Moses and the Hebrews, she reminds us of the difficulties her own people have suffered, emphasizing the idea that any people who were once enslaved will suffer an internal ordeal before they can experience any sort of real belief in themselves, a necessary prerequisite of soul freedom. Hurston's autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road (1942), also addresses the issue of freedom, and a brief discussion of that book will serve as an introduction to the author.

Writing an autobiography presented Hurston with a dilemma. In her novels, Hurston writes about her belief in an ideal freedom, a freedom each individual must obtain for himself. She writes about it with the kind of illuminating detail that suggests personal experience. Janie, of Their Eyes Were Watching God, rises to Hurston's ideal with a completeness almost

excelling human possibility. Arvey struggles to follow Janie's example and is well on her way by the end of her story, Seraph on the Suwanee. After obtaining external freedom, Moses and the Hebrews struggle in the wilderness for forty years in search of Hurston's ideal freedom. Moses will finally realize that this "[f]reedom [is] something internal" (Moses 344).

With this ideal of freedom in mind, this sense that every human must rely on his inner self for freedom and not be tossed about by oppressive externals, Hurston is faced with writing about the harsh realities of her own life as a Black American, the oppressions of her life in a time of Jim Crow laws. How does she write autobiography without complaining, or showing anger, without seeming overly influenced by the externals, without belying her own ideal? If Hurston were a less spectacular and dynamic personality, perhaps the calm, philosophical attitude she adopts in her autobiography when she writes about the racial oppressions of her time would be more convincing. But Hurston was a zany character, the lively center of every gathering, story teller par excellence among her Harlem Renaissance contemporaries, and a woman of legendary wit, coining the term, "Niggerati," as an ironic label for herself and the other members of the Harlem literati (Hemenway 1972, 194). She was also someone who engaged in heated



disputes in which she was not always blameless or philosophically soft spoken. Her quarrel with Langston Hughs over the play Mule Bone remains one recorded testament to this (Hemenway 1978, 136). But before discussing Hurston's dilemma in writing about the oppressions of her time, let's look briefly at some of the parts of her autobiography that give us a glimpse of who she was, a glimpse of the spectacular life that she lived despite the external freedoms she lacked.

Many parts of her autobiography are richly and openly told. She handles the beauties of her life well, telling us about many of her experiences while collecting folklore. We become privy to such terms as "'putting your foot up' on a person" -- "specifying" -- "playing the dozens," and monkey lore, as well as the intricacies of switch blade fighting with instructions from the wonderfully tough Big Sweet, Hurston's female friend and protector in one of the rough and tumble camps where Hurston mined the rich legacy of Black folklore (Dust 186, 187). As she takes us into these camps, visiting jooks and living among the workers, we learn how easily she adapted to new and often dangerous situations, quickly mimicking the demeanor of those around her. Finally, we admire how adept she became at high-tailing it when the jig was up. Hurston's life

was not dull and she shares many exciting moments with us.

She also seems quite frank about her parents and that part of her story feels complete. Hurston's mother, a strong-minded person of remarkably small stature, dominated her Herculean, but rather child-like husband. While Hurston identifies herself as her mama's child, relating how her mother told her to "jump at de sun," she excuses her father by explaining, "Old Maker had left out the steering gear when He gave Papa his talents" (Dust 21, 172). Her father's lack of steering talent leaves the family rudderless after his wife's death, bringing about complete family collapse, the children left to fend for themselves.

Hurston laments over her failure to fulfill her mother's last wishes. Zora was to ask the mourners to break with ritual; she was to ask them to wait to "take the pillow from under her [mother's] head until she was dead" and "the clock was not to be covered, nor the looking glass" (Dust 86). But as Hurston explains, that "would have been a sacrilege, and no nine-year-old voice was going to thwart them" (Dust 89). Her father holds her back as she physically attempts to fulfill her mother's wishes. So at nine, Hurston was left without a mother and basically without family security of any kind. She handled it. She writes about it

plainly, both in her autobiography and in her novel, Jonah's Gourd Vine (1934). She writes about her father in more-or-less forgiving tones, but for the outsider who was to be her step-mother she gives no quarter, writing of her detestation for that woman without mincing words.

I looked at her hard. And like everybody else's enemy, her looks, her smells, her sounds were all mixed up with her doings, and she deserved punishment for them as well as her acts. The feelings of all those six years were pressing inside me like steam under a valve. I didn't have any thoughts to speak of. Just the fierce instinct of flesh on flesh -- me kicking and beating on her pudgy self -- those two ugly false teeth in front -- her dead on the floor -- grinning like a dead dog in the sun. Consequences be damned! If I died, let me die with my hands soaked in her blood. I wanted her blood and plenty of it. That is the way I went into the fight, and that is the way I fought it.  
(Dust 101, 102)

All the horrors of a wicked stepmother are in evidence in Zora's account of hers. She hated her most for the terrible treatment that was meted out to her sister, Sarah, and the humiliation her father brought on himself for putting up with it.

Zora Neale Hurston knew how to live; she knew how to love; and she knew how to hate: "I have fondled hatred with the red-hot tongs of Hell. That's living" (Dust 285). But because this hard-fighting, sometimes irrational person is consistently the picture we get of

Zora, how are we to accept the unflinchingly calm words of her autobiography when she writes about the issue of racial discrimination? This is where the problem lies; this begins to explain the dilemma she faces when she writes her autobiography, how to admit the anger and not the bitterness, how to adhere to her belief in not being overly affected by externals and at the same time write with honesty about the Jim Crow laws of her day. Her choice seems to be to ignore the anger and take on a philosophical attitude.

Although, Hurston grew up in the all-Black town of Eatonville, Florida, an anomaly in its time, and a protection of sorts against racial prejudice, Hurston lived in an era (1891-1960) of extreme prejudice against her race.

Yet, in Dust Tracks on a Road, she does not talk about overcoming hatred when she witnessed mistreatment of Blacks or the humiliation they all suffered because of it. Her extreme hatred of her stepmother when she was forced to witness the humiliation and mistreatment of sister and father hints at a Zora who would not have been so mild-mannered in relating an account of prejudice; it hints at another kind of reaction, a reaction Hurston feels she cannot tell us about because it goes against the intellectual freedom and the soul freedom that she attains through the school of hard

knocks and the soul freedom she writes about in her last three novels. The key here, though, is the word, "attains." Probably Hurston had a head start because of her Eatonville background, but it is difficult to believe when she asserts, "I have no lurid tales to tell of race discrimination at Barnard" (Dust 169).

And the extreme philosophical control of the barbershop story is even more difficult to swallow. Black workers throw out a Black man who demands a haircut in a White-clientele-only, Black-owned shop. Zora views the whole scene from her position as manicurist, manicurist of fat White politicians. I marvel at her detachment when she recounts this story, her ability to wonder if those that yell prejudice wouldn't be just as tyrannical if the situation were reversed. This is a wonderfully valid observation, but is she telling us what she really felt in those moments? Somehow I doubt it. Most of us would have been messing with those "red-hot tongs of Hell," fondling a little hatred (Dust 285). As Hurston reminds us in Seraph on the Suwanee: "What human can desert his memories" (212).

I do not disbelieve for a moment that Hurston attained the wonderful freedom of soul she so knowledgeably writes about in her last three novels. But again, "attain" is the key word. In her novels she

also writes about the struggle, and she writes about it with the wonderful clarity and veracity of someone who has been there, someone who has experienced that same struggle. Hurston, having made an intellectual decision not to react negatively to White society, feels she cannot trespass that decision in the telling of her life story, not even long enough to tell us about the struggle to attain that goal. She feels she must be the example, like Janie, the personification of her ideal. Consequently, we do not feel invited into parts of Zora's life. Evasion pervades her autobiography. Hurston invites us right into Janie's and Arvay's bedrooms, but with Zora she closes too many doors and then sits outside them, with the key in her lap, philosophizing, at times becoming almost pedantic, definitely not a trait of Hurston's writing in general.

John Lowe in his article about Hurston's humor casts her evasion in Dust in a favorable light by saying that "Hurston quite consciously 'accentuated the positive' and avoided bitterness, a quality she scorns in humorous, incongruous terms . . ." (288). Hurston acknowledges that she has "been in Sorrow's Kitchen and licked out all the pots," but that this has not made her "want to low-rate the human race, nor any whole section of it" (Dust 280). She says, "I take no refuge from myself in bitterness" (Dust 280). Hurston makes

it clear that freedom is something that esteems the self, but does not berate others, making slavery an impossibility among truly free beings.

What exactly is this freedom Hurston knows so much about? I hope the following discussion will help to clarify that. But nothing can tell it better than Hurston's own telling. So here, at the beginning, I recommend the reading and the re-reading of the original texts, because, finally, there is no way to understand Hurston but by reading Hurston.

Some of Hurston's works, as is usual, have received much more attention than others, the most popular being the story of Janie in Their Eyes Were Watching God. However, Seraph on the Suwanee deserves more serious attention than it has previously enjoyed. Only after many more critics treat it seriously, will we begin to understand all that is there. So it is with all good books. For that reason I have spent more time with Arvey and Moses than I have with Janie. I, too, believe Their Eyes Were Watching God to be Hurston's best novel, but I find her other novels worthy of attention, and furthermore, I find that they support and further the themes put forth in Eyes. So if we are really to understand what she is saying in Eyes, we need to closely examine her other works.

Hurston, like most great authors, has something particular to say, something she has a need to say, and she just keeps saying it in different ways. Through the stories of Janie, Moses, and Arvay, Hurston relates her particular way of seeing. We need to listen to all the voices she creates, to consider all the lives she portrays, if we are to hear her, to understand her, to catch the details, the nuances, the complexity of her message. These novels amplify and reflect each other, helping us to form a clear picture of Hurston's belief that true freedom comes from within, and that each of us must finally make ourselves free, understanding that externals are not the meat of freedom. As David Heaton attests: "This is the revolutionary message of Hurston's writing: Liberate the self and all else follows" (36). Hurston's is a message of discovery and liberation. Within ourselves lie the treasures.



Janie, a Prototype for Freedom in  
Hurstons' Their Eyes Were Watching God

When Janie comes back to Eatonville in her overalls we are being shown the symbol of her freedom. No longer is Janie living by the ideals of White culture. She'd been sold into that slavery by her grandmother and then imprisoned herself in it through her alliance with Joe Starks.

Janie first rejects Killicks' 60-acre prison, her grandmother's idea of White respectability. Later she rejects the store and the mayor's wife's image, another prison, this time Joe's idea of White respectability. And finally she embraces the passionate work-a-day world of the Black American. Here she is able to find real love because the Black way of life is her real love.

It is not a safe world, where everything is prescribed and secure; it is, instead, a cauldron of red-hot passions, a world reflected in the rich folk tales and stories told on store-front porches and front stoops. It also, for Janie, is her spiritual home, the only place where she can feel a marriage between the inside and the outside of herself, the only place where she can experience the bees pollinating the pear tree.

This is Black culture teaming with life, life in the rich black soil of the Muck. For Janie the fecundity of life comes not through ownership, but through immersion in the life of her people.

After Joe's death, Janie, "digging around inside herself" discovers that "she hate[s] her grandmother" (137). This hatred can be interpreted as a hatred of her Grandmother's reaction to the historical fact of slavery and her fear of the present fact of White dominance, the two things which caused her grandmother to foist upon Janie a life of security, a life of White respectability, but a life devoid of richness and love. As Bone explains, Nanny "puts her up on the auction block of marriage [because] to Nanny, being married is being like white folks" (17). When Janie comes to her Grandmother for an explanation of her lack of love for Killicks, Nanny, completely exasperated with her, says, "Everybody got tuh tip dey hat tuh you and call you Mis' Killicks, and you come worryin' me about love" (41). To Nanny having a "lawful husband same as Mis' Washburn," an organ, and sixty acres has saved Janie from being "de mule uh de world" the fate of "de nigger woman" (40, 29). Ironically Killicks is on an errand to buy another mule, one for Janie to use, when she runs off with Joe.

Joe Starks "spoke for change and chance," but Janie realizes from the beginning that he does "not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees" (50). Janie notices that Joe "acted like Mr. Washburn" and later in Eatonville, Joe's affinity with the White world becomes even more apparent: he paints his house a "kind of promenading white" like the "houses of Bishop Whipple [and] W. B. Jackson;" he buys "a desk like Mr. Hill['s];" his new house makes the other houses look "like servant's quarters surrounding the 'Big House'" (75).

Joe is out to be the big man, the White man, in his town. The town, wondering whether Joe is a blessing or a curse, "murmured hotly about slavery being over, but every man filled his assignment" (75). In all of this, Janie feels out of place, partly because Joe "had forbidden her to indulge" in the storytelling which takes place on the front porch of the store and partly because she hasn't the White value of materialism (85). Just as she could throw ten of Killicks' acres over her shoulder each day and never miss them, she sees the store as a "waste of life and time" (86). For Janie -- Starks and Killicks own her just as assuredly as her grandmother's masters owned their slaves.

Furthermore, all three, Killicks, Starks, and Nanny, have bought into the White value system, the actions of their lives dictated to them by their reaction to that system. When Hemenway claims that "Zora is saying . . . that it is arrogant for whites to think that black lives are only defensive reactions to white actions," he has things turned around (Hemenway 1986, 79). Zora is rather speaking to her own people, telling them to live out their own cultural values and to quit allowing White values to intrude. Hurston, through Janie, is promoting the philosophy that Black culture has its own beauty and values. Those values are not perfect anymore than the values of White culture are, but they are just as valid. Janie shows no hatred of the White culture, she simply does not hold those values. Rather she hates her grandmother for foisting a stale life on her out of fear of and reaction to the White world; "'Tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it's protection" (30).

After Joe dies and Janie resolves, within herself, her feelings about her past, she begins to ready herself "for her journey to the horizons in search of people; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her" (138). It is possible to hear the voices of both Hurston and Janie resonating in this passage, Hurston's need to share the

richness of Black culture with the world and Janie's need to seek it out as a means to self-realization. To find her people - that is Janie's goal, and she understands that thus far "she had been whipped like a cur dog, and run off down a back road after things" (138).

Tea Cake, for Janie, is not only the bee to her blossom, but he represents the richness, playfulness, the passion, and the immediacy of Black culture. When Janie's friend, Pheoby, cautions her against the likes of Tea Cake, telling her that she is above him, Janie corrects her: "Jody classed me off. Ah didn't" (169). Joe, Janie explains to Pheoby, "wanted me tuh jes sit wid folded hands . . . sit dere wid de walls creepin' up on me and squeezin' all de life outa me" (169). Nanny's idea of life for Janie wasn't much different from Joe's: she wanted her to "git up on uh high chair and sit dere" (172). Finally, in Tea Cake, Janie finds someone whose idea of how life should be lived correlates to her own and she finds "herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it was natural for her to play" (146).

Hezekiah, who helps Janie in the store after Joe's death and who mimics the dead and once powerful Joe by using, "I God" as his favorite profanity, also warns Janie about Tea Cake. As he warns her, Janie asks, "Is

he uh thief . . . Is he bad 'bout totin' pistols and knives tuh hurt people wid?" (155). To all of these Hezekiah answers in the negative, and then explains that the problem is "Tea Cake ain't got doodly squat" (156). The real sin is to be without the material trappings of life. However, Janie has had enough of that and is far more drawn to Tea Cake's zest for life; his ability to live in the moment, and his interest in her as a person, to take her fishing, to work "lak uh dawg for two whole weeks" so he could have a car "tuh haul [her] off in" (164). And finally, despite her original misgivings about their age difference, a difference which Tea Cake explains has "nothin' tuh do wid love," she tells Pheoby, "Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine," also explaining that "dis is a love game" and "no business proposition" (171).

While Janie's life with Tea Cake has its dark moments, the compelling love and vigor for life that they capture together renders those moments innocuous to Janie. As Rosenblatt explains, "It is only when Janie and Tea Cake marry and avoid the white world entirely that they flourish" (32). The danger comes as always when Black people allow White values to penetrate their world. Mrs. Turner is the catalyst that brings about the breakdown of the life Janie and

Tea Cake have created for themselves within the richness of their own culture. Mrs. Turner introduces discrimination, discrimination not from Whites, but from her reaction to the fallacy that Whites are her superiors. Because Mrs. Turner buys into the idea of her own inferiority, she insists on foisting her light-skinned, fine-featured superiority on the more obviously negroid people. With her soul in bondage to the external values of the White world, Mrs. Turner tries to subjugate those she feels are beneath her, just as she feels subjugated by those she feels are above her. Her lack of soul freedom creates havoc among those she associates with.

The dissolution of Janie's and Tea Cake's marriage becomes Mrs. Turner's target, Janie the whiter and therefore superior woman married to the blacker and therefore inferior man. This time discontent does not come through attempting to attain the material wealth or power of the White man, but rather directly through skin color. Either way, though, it comes not from the White community, but through Blacks who react to the White propaganda: "Anyone who looked more white folkish than herself was better than she was by her criteria, therefore it was right that they should be cruel to her at times, just as she was cruel to those more negroid than herself . . ." (215).

The fact that Hurston places the chapter about the hurricane and the rabid dog directly after the Mrs. Turner incidents suggests their close relationship. Hurston creates a wonderfully effective allegorical ending to this novel by using a rabid dog to symbolically infect Tea Cake. The hatred that Mrs. Turner has been sowing takes root in Tea Cake in the form of rabies, and this hatred will destroy everything he and Janie have together, although luckily it will not destroy Janie's memories.

With this kind of influence working from within, the breakdown of a rich and valuable Black culture becomes inevitable. When Tea Cake states "Ah hates dat woman [Mrs. Turner] lak poison," he speaks not just for himself, but for the community, and hatred begins to boil (213). Finally, Tea Cake, unsure of himself, beats Janie. Later, during the hurricane, as he saves Janie from hate (the rabid dog, who "wuzn't nothin' all over but pure hate") he says to her, "Ah'm heah, . . . Ah want yuh tuh know it's uh man heah" (247, 248). The manhood of Tea Cake is never in question except through the eyes of a value system not his own. When that value system insinuates itself into his very front room in the personage of Mrs. Turner, Tea Cake loses his struggle against it; very soon after, the dog, hate, infects him with hate. His internal sense of himself



is not strong enough to combat the external world which challenges it. While Tea Cake has been almost heroic in living his life according to his own vision, the very quality which drew Janie to him, he cannot see through Mrs. Turner's racial innuendos.

When the hurricane warnings come, Tea Cake and Janie decide to stay on the Muck, but it's no use. Destruction is already too close; while Tea Cake would protect Janie from hate at the risk of his own life he cannot protect her from society's desire to devalue him and his own reaction to that devaluation. The infection of hate destroys him. Tea Cake turns his hatred on Janie and she must kill him to preserve her own life, her own integrity.

Janie's inheritance from Tea Cake is a package of seeds, seeds which Hurston will sow into stories about the fecundity of Black culture, and about a particular kind of freedom, the kind of freedom that grows from within until we understand our own worth, a worth that can withstand external attempts to corrupt us, to make us feel and act small, a freedom that can stand against psychological tyranny, the kind of freedom Janie has.

Hurston will continue to write about freedom. She will write about Moses and the Hebrews, who will have to struggle for internal freedom for forty years after they gain external freedom. She will write about Arvay

Henson Meserve, who cannot believe herself worthy of being loved by the charismatic Jim Meserve, just as Tea Cake comes to doubt his worthiness to be loved by the light-skinned Janie.

Freedom and Relationship in  
Hurstons' Seraph on the Suwanee

Seraph on the Suwanee, Hurston's only novel with White protagonists, is the portrait of a woman of angelic spirit, but who has no sense of her own worth. Hurston manages to portray, through Arvay Henson, the wonderful potential that is lost when women can't believe in themselves. Arvay represents the woman who is not self-actualized, who does not know how to participate in the world outside her own home. Because she has been hurt, her life is consumed with self-protection. When her husband tries to involve her in his world, she resists. When he struggles to make her life better, she does not recognize his effort. The spouse of such a woman does not enjoy the benefits of marriage, and must endure the hardships without support. Jim Meserve's perseverance in attempting to bring his wife into the light of day is next to heroic.

Jim's initial statements to Arvay on his views of women are wrenchingly chauvinistic; in the first two lines of the following quote, we are uncomfortably reminded of Jody Starks:

Women folks don't have no mind to make up nohow. They wasn't made for that. Lady folks were made to laugh and act loving and

kind and have a good man to do for them all  
he's able . . . . (25)

But Hurston lets us know immediately, through Arvay's mental response, not to put too much stock in Jim's assertions.

. . . that meant that if she married Jim Meserve, her whole duty as a wife was to just love him good, be nice and kind around the house and have children for him. She could do that and be more than happy and satisfied, but it looked too simple. There must be a catch in it somewhere. (36)

Partly this is Arvay's insecurity speaking, but beyond that, it is Hurston setting us up for what is to come.

Despite what Jim thinks he thinks about women, he wants something else. He wants "a knowing and a doing love" (262). This is made apparent later in the story when Arvay is hurt by an innocent joke and Jim hating the fact that she is hurt, is stricken because "There was not sufficient understanding in his marriage" (104). This is not the first time he has been troubled by this condition, nor will it be the last. This time, he chastises himself by reminding himself of his supposed view of women: "My God! What had got into him? Arvay had acted dumb, but what could you expect? She was a woman . . . ." (105). He also tells himself that "He had played the fool, not Arvay," convincing himself that all was as it should be, a self-subterfuge he will eventually have to give up (105).

This book, besides being the chronicle of Arvay's quest for soul freedom, is a romance of marriage. It is the struggle that two people go through to get it right. Unlike Janie, Arvay is in love with her first and only husband. Seraph on the Suwanee is not the story of a woman caught in relationships with less-than-free men; it is the story of a man caught in a relationship with a less-than-free woman. As Janie loves Tea Cake and would stay with him as long as possible, so Jim loves Arvay. He stays with her as Janie stays with Tea Cake until he perceives that Arvay's bondage is dangerous to him, as Tea Cake's (bondage) rabies was dangerous to Janie. The marriage takes place at the beginning of the story, but the building of a good marital relationship, one in which each partner takes initiative, and holds the other "up on every leaning side," takes the entire book to achieve (252).

While Robert Hemenway has done an admirable job of compiling a life of Hurston, he misreads Seraph on the Suwanee when he asserts that "Just as Arvay begins to become interesting, she is lost again to domestic service" (Hemenway 1978, 314). This book is about two things: First, Arvay Henson Meserve's lack of self-confidence, and secondly, how the lack of self-confidence in one marriage partner can undermine a

relationship. The fact that Arvay finds the confidence to return to Jim and "strut her stuff" is the triumph of the novel.

Arvay has no freedom of soul. Her actions are inhibited by the fear that she is not good enough, fear that she'll be laughed at or rejected, and puritanical fears that inhibit her sexual initiative. Jim is concerned before the marriage because "Arvay was always with [him] in public, but she held away from him when they were alone" (42). Because of this concern, Jim takes Arvay to her most sacred place, her place under the mulberry tree, and there he ravishes her. Arvay fights it and then enjoys it, finally even initiating, which will not happen again for a very long time. She worries, momentarily, that now she really has been made a fool of, and reasons that now he will, of course, leave her; instead he rushes her to the court house to make an honest woman of her.

At this juncture, Arvay believes "her secret sin [has been] forgiven and her soul set free" (Seraph 57). However, it is too soon for such full recovery from a lifetime of self-doubt, and these emotions only adumbrate those she will not be able to internalize fully until much later. Hurston seems to be saying that souls are not made free so easily, that Arvay, like all of us, will have to struggle for her freedom.

So, while she enjoys this sense of blessed soul freedom momentarily, time and time again, she will succumb to her more prominent sense of herself, self-doubt.

Throughout her courtship and most of her married life, Arvay does not believe that anyone could really love her, especially not this fine specimen of a man, Jim Meserve, her husband. She believes she was "born to take other people's leavings" and Jim Meserve is nobody's leftovers (Seraph 24). In fact, Hurston describes him as a "hamstring" who "was not meat any longer, but . . . smelled of what he had once been associated with," ante-bellum plantation wealth (Seraph 7).

By the time Jim Meserve happens into the "teppentime" town of Sawley, Florida, Arvay already has a firm picture of herself as someone who "was not born for luck" (Seraph 18). After all, she was just a poor Florida "Cracker" and she wasn't even particularly accepted by others of her kind (8).

She just didn't fit in. Arvay's "shape was not exactly in style in those parts"; she was not "heavy hipped" and did not have the "much-admired 'whiskey-keg' look to her legs" (4). While we can see that Hurston is describing Arvay as a more elegant sort of woman, we also must understand that Arvay's family saw her as less desirable than her "more robust"

sister, Lorraine. In fact, this is an ugly duckling story. But even when a handsome swan comes to rescue Arvay, it will be a long, long time before she is able to forget the difficult time she had among the ducks. "The general preference for Lorraine, Arvay's more robust and aggressive sister, had done something to Arvay's soul across the years" (9).

Hurston, no stranger to such feelings, admits to having had a sense of inferiority about her own appearance (Hemenway 1978, 310). And we also know through her autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road, that she was not her father's daughter of preference. "My sister, Sarah, was his favorite child, but that one girl was enough" (Dust 27). She then notes in her usual lighten-it-up way that "A little of my sugar used to sweeten his [her father's] coffee right now. That is a Negro way of saying his patience was short with me" (Dust 27).

But Hurston isn't writing only about the struggle women have with believing in themselves. While writing Seraph on the Suwanee, Hurston wrote to her Scribner's editor, asking if he had "ever been tied in close contact with a person who had a strong sense of inferiority" (qtd in Hemenway 1978, 312). Hurston goes on to say that she has had such a relationship and describes several incidents she went through with a



male friend (Hemenway 1978, 312). It is clear through this exchange that Hurston is painfully aware of the chaos such feelings can create in a relationship, no matter which partner exhibits them. In Seraph on the Suwanee, Hurston explores the lack of fulfillment in a relationship when one partner cannot believe in or realize his or her potential. Even when the parties love each other as Janie and Tea Cake do, and as Jim and Arvay do, the relationship is doomed if both partners are not free.

When the confident Jim Meserve's attention lights on Arvay, it's bound to stir up some curiosity in the small town of Sawley. Jim, a handsome newcomer, is being baited by every girl in town. Knowing people are watching him, Arvay feels particularly vulnerable to humiliation when he decides to court her. Her only thought is self-protection. She must protect herself from what she believes will surely be the end result: she will be made a fool of and everyone will know.

Believing she was doomed to spinsterhood after losing a suitor to her sister's conniving ways, Arvay has given her life to God in front of the entire congregation of Sawley. Arvay depends on her self-proclaimed missionary status to protect her from further hurt. When any young local tries to challenge her vows by attempting to court Arvay, she conveniently

has a fit or spasm on the front room sofa. While we are never told these seizures are staged, we certainly get that feeling when Jim Meserve drops a tiny drop of turpentine in her eye which immediately "cures" her seizure. Jim, it is soon apparent, is there to make a difference and will not be so easily put off. Of course, Arvay is outraged, but the self-assured Jim, simply asserts that her cure will save him "a whole lot of doctor bills," letting Arvay know in no uncertain terms that he intends to marry her (34). But Arvay will prove a difficult case; Meserve will eventually discover that someone who doesn't have an internal sense of self can't believe they are loved no matter how lovingly they are served.

Because of Arvay's strong conviction that she could not be the object of love for such an obvious catch as Jim Meserve, she almost scares him off. "Now, was she to believe that this very pretty man clothed in all the joys of Heaven and earth was for her . . . . Oh, no, this was just another hurting joke being played on her" (26). At this point, Hurston is careful to let us know that Jim Meserve has needs and weaknesses, too. He almost loses the courage to pursue Arvay when she becomes so extremely unsure of herself that she strikes out at him in defensive ways. Even when Arvay feels "Jim's hand on her elbow tremble" after she delivers

some invective, she only believes she has imagined the tremble (26). Arvay can totally dismiss Jim's humanness, his needs, because, like many insecure people, she is completely wrapped up in her fears for herself. This inability to sense Jim's needs will manifest itself again and again over the years of their marriage. Jim will serve and serve, but will receive no acknowledgement.

Arvay, tremendously attracted to Jim Meserve, wants to believe in the miracle of his love, but after twenty-five years of marriage and all Jim can do to convince her, she says to him, "I never is believed you really loved me, Jim . . ." (266).

She has moments of belief, but they are only that moments, and then her old insecure feelings reassert themselves. It is not that Arvay does not grow; her life with Jim is filled with the many vicissitude of life and through these experiences Arvay becomes stronger, finally believing herself worthy to sit on the beautiful new sun porch Jim builds for her, finally able to tease and laugh. But to gain real internal freedom, the ability to act despite her fears, Arvay will have to be alone, without the protection of Jim Meserve. Perhaps more importantly, she will have to understand that unless she can learn to believe in

herself enough to act on her own, she will lose Jim Meserve.

Because she can't believe herself worthy of love, she is unable to love Jim in a dynamic way, a love he describes as "a knowing and a doing love" (262). Jim wants so much for her to understand the doing kind of love he feels for her, and to return it, to recognize the great lengths he goes to give her a good life. But instead, as Lillie Howard notes, when he brings home a Christmas turkey, she cooks it up, but fails to ask how he could come by such a prize (271).

Finally, after a lifetime of a lack of acknowledgement, of trying to fulfill her needs while his own are left wanting, he rages at her: "You love like a coward. Don't take no steps at all. Just stand around and wait for things to happen out right. Unthankful and unknowing like a hog under an acorn tree" (262). Jim wants action. He wants her to see his needs, not just her own; he wants her to risk being hurt, but as usual, her answer will only be about herself, an answer reflecting not only her lack of self-esteem, but her religiosity which has always been her escape hatch: ". . . the only holt I ever had on you was the way you craved after my body. Otherwise, I felt you looking down on me all the time" (262). Arvay, ever-responsive to Jim's caresses, finds them

less than nice when she's on the defensive. In fact, when Jim arouses Arvay's sensuality, causing "that mysterious green light [to appear] in Arvay's blue eyes," we see, in her eyes, the reason Jim continues, for so long, to hope for the release of her soul: "He placed Arvay as having powers that few women on earth had" (106). So, the now disillusioned Jim, in his usual common sense way, quickly refreshes her memory:

Fighting back and holding a grudge against me because I filled the bill in the finest part of our life. I was your man, that's all, just like you was my natural woman. It's a mighty good idea to let God run things. He ain't give nobody a thing He didn't expect 'em to use, your Goddamned lap-legged missionaries to the contrary.  
(263)

Arvay's lack of self-confidence, her inability to believe that Jim could love a poor Cracker girl like herself, parallels Tea Cake's inability to cope when a negative outside influence (Mrs. Turner) proves too much for his internal view of himself, when he begins to see himself as too black for Janie to love. For both Tea Cake and Arvay the effects of inadequate self-esteem are devastating to their relationships. Hurston's themes of self-awareness, belief-in-self, and the dynamics of relationship are very much at work in both Their Eyes Were Watching God and Seraph on the Suwanee.

One of the most realistic parts of Arvay's story is her momentary glimpses of self-assurance followed by relapses into self-doubt. For women (or men) who have grown up with even a modicum of self-doubt, this scenario has the ring of truth. Consequently, this is a somewhat uncomfortable novel to read, since very likely a majority of us have less self-confidence than we would like to have and are painfully aware of the difficulty of shedding our self-doubt.

Through Arvay's daughter, Angeline, Hurston shows us the marked contrast between a person raised to believe in herself and a person, like Arvay, who is defeated in her heart by her upbringing. When Angeline falls in love with Hatton, we see how a self-confident young woman operates.

Arvay, chastising her daughter for her forward ways, is, in turn, chastised by Angeline: "But, Mama! You don't catch on so good. You see, I knew that poor Hatton would love me if he only knew me, so I had to let the poor thing know, . . ." (174). Angeline Meserve does not wait for the town-catch to seek her out, she makes the first move, "so he could come to be happy some day" (174). This self-assured Meserve is bold, assertive, and believes in her own female intuitions. Angeline, as her name indicates, is already realizing her seraphic potential, and the

implication is that because both Hatton and Angeline believe in themselves, their relationship will consist of two dynamic partners, in contrast to the dynamic Jim Me Serve, coupled with the passive, defensive, Arvay.

Earl David, Jim and Arvay's defective firstborn, is pivotal to understanding many of Arvay's destructive feelings. He signifies to her the degenerative family from which she has sprung; she must "defend her background and justify it so that Jim could accept it and her along with it" (272). In her self-deluding mind, "Peace, contentment and virtue hung like a rainbow over turpentine shacks and shanties" (272). She hangs onto a romanticized view of her Cracker past and pretends it was all okay, in the same way she hangs onto Earl, pretending he is okay.

After Earl, who often does not recognize his own family members, severely bites Arvay's hand, Jim suggests Earl be institutionalized. Arvay's reply is typically irrational, "I know so well that Earl wouldn't hurt a living soul" (126). Jim submits to her wishes, knowing the terrible risk they are taking if they allow Earl to run free, but he is willing to risk for Arvay's sake. Self-risk, for Hurston, seems to be a necessary element of love, an element missing in those whose souls are in bondage. Arvay identifies with Earl and imagines that Jim doesn't love the child

because Earl is more Henson than Meserve. "Earl is always wrong because he's like my folks" (126). Because of her insecurities "She felt that she and Earl were shut off in loneliness by themselves," and she considers leaving Jim and returning to her own kind (131). It will take two visits back home for Arvay to finally face the truth about her family and her narrow, backward past.

Earl is symbolic of that part of Arvay which has to be purged before she can create beauty or feel worthy of beauty. "She had been purged out and the way was cleared for better things" (350). Earl David represents that monster in us all that must be expurgated, if we are to walk free, although to extricate ourselves from it, it is as if we are tearing away part of ourselves with agonizing pain. So it was for Arvay.

With the help of the people in her life who love her, Arvay eventually grows to be the person to whom Jim will issue an ultimatum, the person who is finally strong enough to rise to the challenge. All is risked when Jim leaves her, but he can do no more by staying, and he wants her whole or not at all. As he leaves, he reveals things to her he had hoped she would come to see for herself, letting her know why the swamp was cleared, why he built up his fishing fleet, why he



performed sundry other acts of love. All was done, he tells her, "as a honor and comfort to you" (265).

I never have seen you as a teppentime Cracker like you have thrown in my face time and again. I saw you like a king's daughter out of a story-book with your long, soft golden hair. You were deserving, and noble, and all I ever wanted to do was to have the chance to do for you and protect you. But never one time have I ever heard you mention that you understood all that. (263, 264)

Jim's departure is precipitated by Arvay's final failure to relinquish her fears, even when holding on to them means Jim's death. Even though Arvay believed "she could part with anything, even principles, before she could give up this man," she cannot act because she has no belief in her own ability to effect change (158). Through this scene that rivals Tea Cake and Janie's episode with the rabid dog, Hurston gives us an uncomfortable visceral glimpse of the inner suffering of an unfree soul.

Working outside with Jeff, Jim finds a tremendous rattlesnake and decides to tackle it because he sees "a chance to do something big and brave and full of manhood, thinking maybe he might win admiration out of [Arvay] and compliments and a big hug around his neck. He knowed all the time how dangerous it was, and that he had a chance to lose, but he was a man in love, so he took the chance" (261). This chance taking, this

gambling despite the odds has been Jim's way of life since meeting Arvay, but she cannot risk in that way for those she loves. As Jim says, "It ain't really love when you gamble with your stuff out the window," playing it safe, allowing your fears to dictate your behavior (177).

When the snake proves too much for Jim, and coils around his body he calls to her, "'Ar . . .vay! Help . . . me'" (255). But Arvay cannot move; "fear surrounded her about" (255). She cannot act. She imagines herself acting, imagines herself grappling with the snake, but she remains in bondage, unable to move. Arvay's fears are not only dangerous to herself, they are dangerous to Jim. She cannot help him when he is in need; only Jeff's return saves Jim. And Jeff, who in Arvay's eyes is black and lower classed than she is, judges her; with a look he lets her know she is not worthy of this man "by reason of cowardice and treason and trashiness" (256). The snake, symbolic of so many things Arvay fears, is judged by Jim as worthy to live and he instructs Jeff not to kill it because he says, "A gentleman, Jeff, puts up the best fight that he's got in him to defend his life and what belongs to him" (258). It would be difficult for Arvay to miss the inference that she had not done as much. Now she must go into the house with Jim and finally he will tell her

that he is "tired," tired of "trying to free [her] soul" (266). Perhaps he should have realized as Moses will that that can only be done by the owner of the soul, but Jim is not Moses and he has done the best he can. Now it will be, as it should be, up to Arvay.

Through Hurston's spectacular allegorical depiction of Arvay's fears, it becomes clear that within the confines of her marriage, Arvay, even to save Jim's life, is not capable of developing the ability to act dynamically. She must be set free, though that is the last thing she wants, if she is ever to believe in herself enough to initiate love making or to participate fully in the world beyond the confines of her home. Only then, with the power to act on her own, will she be able to return triumphant to the relationship as full partner. Arvay's words to Jim, as Jim explains he's leaving and why, say it all: "So, if I'm ever to be with you again, I got to make the first move" (267). "My meaning exactly," he confirms (267).

Arvay will return to Sawley and her mulberry tree and there confer with herself. Through her sister she will realize the degenerate person she might have become had Jim not come into her life. She understands that she had been lucky enough to get away from a place that had "hurt and disease[d] her, but that Larraine

"had never been away" and that had made the difference between them (306). "Certainly the afternoon of her life was more pleasant than the morning had been" (298). Arvay marvels at the fact that she is stronger than the others in her family and finally in this sees a truth: "Maybe there were a lot of weak feeling folks in the world" (295). Through the petty actions of her weak feeling relatives Arvay begins to see her own weak ways. She wonders about her treatment of other people and realizes the "fault could be in her" (300). She begins to understand Jim's friendship with people she had considered her inferiors. She realizes, as Mrs. Turner never does, the relationship between her own inferior feelings and her need to feel that some people are beneath her.

She returns to Jim, triumphant, a free woman capable of sharing a dynamic relationship with a free man. Perhaps, though, it is more accurate to say that she is a woman struggling to be free. She is not the idealistic heroine that Janie is; she is not the prototype. Arvay is more like the rest of us: she struggles to be free and finally becomes successful enough to fight and risk for those she loves. It is interesting that at the end of her quest, Arvay, like Janie, dons men's work clothes and takes part in the work of her husband. She becomes part of the greater

world and in a final romantic scene, wearing nothing but a work shirt, seduces her husband. "Within her own flesh were many mysteries. She lifted her left hand before her eyes and studied it in every detail with wonder. With wonder and deep awe like Moses before his burning bush" (350). Arvay has come to appreciate the wonder that is herself.

Hurston's Moses, Man of the Mountain  
and Putting the Pieces Together

Their Eyes Were Watching God, Seraph on the Suwanee, and Moses, Man of the Mountain comprise a three-part treatise on freedom. Janie, of Their Eyes Were Watching God, is Hurston's prototype for soul freedom, a freedom based on an internal realization of self worth, a freedom which is not determined by what external powers tell us we are or should be, an inner freedom finally that transcends societal pressure.

Hurston endows Janie with the qualities of soul freedom from the first; she immediately realizes that "Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree . . . ." (Eyes 28). She never believes, as Arvay does, that "she was born to take other people's leavings" (Seraph 24). Even after being slapped by her "I God" husband, Janie does not falter. She simply examines her "inside" feelings and finds that "she was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them" (Eyes 112, 113). She does not think she deserves the treatment Jody metes out. Her internal view of herself is not corrupted by external pressure. She maintains her internal view of herself even though

she is forced to live in a world that does not support it. She is Hurston's heroic example.

At first Janie is too young and too unknowledgeable about life to defy her grandmother's expectations. She resists, listening to her inner wisdom, but in the end capitulates to her Grandmother's dreams for her. Janie's struggle will be to free herself from her external prison keepers: her grandmother, Logan Killick, and Jody Starks. By living in the prisons these three create, Janie learns what freedom is not. It isn't sitting up on the high stool her grandmother invented for her; it isn't being penned up on Killick's 60 acres, or turning into a mule for the sake of gaining a few more acres; and it isn't "all dis bowin' down, dis obedience under yo' voice . . ." that Jody Stark's imitation of White life demands of her (Eyes 134). Janie's quest is to understand how to get the external freedom her intrinsic sense of herself tells her she deserves.

Only on the Muck with Tea Cake does she discover love and freedom as the pear tree instructed her it could be. One wonders if Hurston has Janie experience her finest hours on the Muck not only because the Muck represents the fecundity of Black culture, but also because this lets us know that soul freedom has nothing to do with riches or status. Only when we have too

little soul freedom can these things have power over us, as demonstrated in the tragedy of Tea Cake. Tea Cake, so rich with spontaneous living, the king of the Muck, has a tragic flaw: he is threatened by the "color-struck" Mrs. Turner (Eyes 220). He doesn't simply dislike her, and dismiss her, he "hates dat woman lak poison" (Eyes 213). Insecure about his own blackness, the blackness that lowers his status in Mrs. Turner's eyes, Tea Cake succumbs to hatred and is destroyed.

The light-colored Janie is "bewildered" when Mrs. Turner's rants about the unfairness of being "lumped in wid all de rest" of the Blacks when she (Mrs. Turner) "ain't got no flat nose and liver lips" (Eyes 211). Janie's simple response to Mrs. Turner, "It don't worry me atall," epitomizes the reaction Hurston would prescribe for us all when we find ourselves in prejudicial circumstances (Eyes 211). Janie's internal freedom is strong enough to combat the external pressure Mrs. Turner perpetuates and is herself a victim of. Janie feels no inadequacy in her race and forthrightly asks Mrs. Turner, "We'se uh mingled people and all of us got black kinfolks as well as yaller kinfolks. How come you so against black?" (Eyes 210).

Hurston will continue to remind us through two successive novels that "Freedom [is] something



internal" -- and something we have to acquire on our own (Moses 344). As Janie, our model, reminds us:

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

Janie, Hurston's most finely drawn protagonist, sets the stage for Arvay, Moses, and Hurston's further exploration of freedom.

Through Arvay, Hurston lets us know that race has nothing to do with self-esteem, that all people raised in circumstances of belittlement will have trouble with matters of self-worth. Arvay must somehow follow Janie's example and find freedom. However, beaten down by her negative upbringing, Arvay has none of Janie's self-confidence. Believing no one could possibly love her, she is suspicious of those who would love her, just as Tea Cake is suspicious of Janie once he is bitten by the rabid dog, Hate. What would the handsome Jim Meserve want with Arvay or the light-colored Janie with Tea Cake?

Arvay: "I never is believed you really loved me, Jim. (Seraph 266).

Tea Cake: "You stay where Ah kin see yuh" (Eyes 268).

Shortly before Tea Cake says this, Janie realizes "that big old dawg with the hatred in his eyes had killed her after all," meaning that part of her would die with Tea Cake (Eyes 263). Just as Janie's happiness is threatened by Tea Cake's loss of freedom, so is Jim's by Arvay's inability to find freedom. After Jim tells Arvay he's tired of "trying to free [her] soul," he says to her, "I'm pushing fifty now, Arvay, and no use in me hoping no more" (Seraph 266). Lack of self-confidence is not only destructive to the person lacking it, but to those who love that person or are associated with that person.

Imagine, then, the devastating results if a whole people suffer from low self-esteem, are subject to the external messages an oppressive society has foisted upon them. In Moses, Man of the Mountain, Hurston attempts to define those results. Through Moses, whose job it is to free a whole people, she tells us "that no man may make another free. Freedom [is] something internal" (Moses 344). Same theme, grander scale.

I agree with Alice Walker when she says that "Moses, Man of the Mountain (1939) is one of the rarest, most important books in black literature and should be required reading for all black children," but I want to carry that a step further (Love Myself 176). Moses, Man of the Mountain should be required reading

for all students who wish to have some understanding of their own ability to be free and some understanding of how oppression works.

When Hurston wrote "Crazy for This Democracy", she addressed this great theme of hers in a satirical voice and it is a wild read. Toward the end of the essay she writes:

No one of darker skin can ever be considered an equal. Seeing the daily humiliations of the darker confirms the child in its superiority, so that it comes to feel it the arrangement of God. By the same means, the smallest dark child is to be convinced of its inferiority, so that it is to be convinced that competition is out of the question, and against all nature and God. All physical and emotional things flow from this premise. The unnatural exaltation of one ego, and the equally unnatural grinding down of the other. (Love Myself 168)

So. Here we have the White grinding down the Black. In Seraph, it is the White grinding down the White. And in Moses, the color line goes from Black grinding down White to complete ambiguity of color and ethnic group, because Hurston leaves Moses's lineage completely open to question. Is he of the oppressor's race or is he of the oppressed's race? Good and bad, right and wrong, weak and strong are not color-based.

Hurston's reversal of the Black and White in Moses, Man of the Mountain exemplifies her idea that people act certain ways under certain conditions regardless of

race. When the rumors about Moses's origins begin circulating around the Egyptian court, his Ethiopian wife yells at him, "It is rape for you to even look at me. Get out of my bedroom. This is no place for Hebrew slaves" (Moses 87). Later, after the exodus, the Hebrew, Miriam, will accuse the dark and beautiful Zipporah, Moses' Midian wife, of coming "to queen it over us poor people and rob us. Look at her trying to look like Mrs. Pharaoh" (Moses 270).

Hurston has the Ethiopian berating the slave and the ex-slave jealous of the dark Zipporah's "poise and elegance" (Moses 269). Oppressors come in all colors, as do the oppressed. As Hurston tells us in Dust Tracks on a Road, her "interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color" (Dust 206). Hurston's last three novels all delineate the psychology of the oppressed, and the difficult road to freedom; stories, settings, cultures, and races vary, but Hurston's message -- to rise above oppression and make ourselves free -- is a constant.

The formidability of that rise becomes the meat of Hurston's work. In Seraph and Moses, though the stories are completely different, the process of liberation is almost identical. The oppressed (Arvay and the Hebrews) freed from external bondage by a liberator (Jim or Moses), find freedom more difficult than they

imagined, responsibility and hardship causing them to romanticize their past bondage and bondsmen. A purging process becomes necessary for the oppressed to gain enough wisdom and strength to recognize that the benefits of freedom are worth the struggle.

By late afternoon of the second day of the exodus the Hebrews are grumbling, "some grumbled about sore feet and some missed their beds and houses" (Moses 232). When it is discovered that Pharaoh is hard on their trail the whimpering and cursing really begin. A woman cries, "I always told my husband not to bother with this mess" (Moses 232). Another laments: "Didn't I always tell you all that them Egyptians was nice people to work for? You couldn't find better bossmen nowhere" (Moses 233). At the first signs of hardship and trouble, captivity takes on a strange allure; it is romanticized beyond recognition. In fact, even before Moses gets them out of Egypt they are complaining because Moses won't let them have a day off to go fishing (Moses 224).

Hurston's genius for dialect is nowhere put to more advantageous use than in this allegorical novel. With her fantastic high-spirited brilliance she weaves together the oppression of the Hebrews with the oppression of Black Americans and to a great extent she does it through dialect; the "bossman," "this mess,"

and "you all," are but a few examples. She also uses some of her favorite cultural pass-times, fishing for instance, to bring the flavor of Black America to Moses's exodus. Another time, when Moses has lost all patience with these slaves he is attempting to make free, he says to them, "I had the idea all along that you came out here hunting freedom. I didn't know you were hunting a barbecue" (Moses 252).

Hurston's adroitness at combining humor with serious theme, her ability to spin a story about one people while reflecting the problems of another, makes us wonder if she took lessons from Edmund Spenser. Like Spenser's, Hurston's writing not only reflects life, but suggests that there are certain pitfalls and that those pitfalls are usually overcome through experience. "You have to go to life to know life. God! It costs you something to do good! You learn that by experience, too" (Moses 105). But one gets the idea from both Spenser and Hurston that they hope the experience of reading counts, that what they bothered to write will somehow make a difference. Hurston in her own way is a Moses, a Jim, a Janie: a liberator and an heroic example. She has also been the oppressed: an Arvay, a Hebrew. Just as Moses has, she has "conferred with the Never Untrue, which in a common way of

speaking people call Experience" (Moses 105). (The capitals are Hurston's.)

Throughout Moses, Man of the Mountain, Zora speaks to her people. We can almost hear her pleading, "My people! My people!" (Dust 215). While in Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston claims "Light came to me when I realized that I did not have to consider any racial group as a whole. God made them duck by duck and that was the only way I could see them," still she writes of her people (viz. Mules and Men), and to her people (Dust 235). While she is color blind in good ways, she nevertheless understands the realities of oppression, that it is difficult to get your inside right when you've been oppressed. When she writes --- "This was the second going out. He had led out Pharaoh's slaves. Now he must lead out a free and singing people from inside the cringing slaves" --- she is talking to her people (Moses 324).

What happens in Moses, Man of the Mountain? What is this book about? In most aspects the story line follows that of Exodus. We meet Aaron, Miriam, Joshua, and Jethro to name a few. We visit the Egyptian palace, the tents of Jethro, and camp by the Red Sea. Hurston first takes us to Goshen and lets us eavesdrop on the Hebrew slaves. There we learn that Amram's wife is about to give birth. Worried about Pharaoh's law

that no Hebrew boys be born, Amram is planning a hiding place for his wife. When he arrives home, however, the babe is already on the way. But is this baby Moses? The text never makes this clear. Moses's heritage is ambiguous in Hurston's rendition of the story. Is he Hebrew or Egyptian? We never know for sure. In the King James version there is no doubt. Moses was drawn from the water by Pharaoh's daughter and his Hebrew mother was sent for to nurse him (Exodus 2:4-9).

If Hurston gives us any impression it is more the reverse of the Biblical version. Miriam sees no one bring Moses out of the water. Rather to get herself out of trouble for falling asleep on watch, she fabricates a story that, considering the facts, could be true. The reader is left guessing, but with a slightly stronger case for Egyptian heritage, an assertion perhaps that racial or ethnic identification means nothing until we make them mean something. Moses was the man he was, whatever his lineage.

In Moses, Man of the Mountain, Hurston shows us the oppressor's arrogance, ignorance, pettiness, and weakness, but she also shows us the ex-slave's ignorance, pettiness, weakness, and even his would-be arrogance. After reading Moses, Man of the Mountain, we end up shaking our heads and saying to the entire human race, "My people! My people!" And of course,



this is exactly Hurston's point: abuse of power -- smallness under oppression -- regardless of lineage. Whether we are the oppressed or the oppressor, we need to make ourselves free, free of pettiness, weakness, etc. Hurston does not quite say that even a slave can be free, if he can see past the oppressor's dogma, but she comes close. She comes even closer to saying that oppressors are not free, are themselves enslaved.

As Pharaoh begins to lose face with his nobleman because he can do nothing to stop Moses, it becomes increasingly apparent that the reigning monarch is enslaved by those that expect him to maintain them in their power. When Pharaoh says he will not let the Hebrews go, Moses corrects him: "You mean you can't let them go. You wish you could" (Moses 215). Pharaoh has no real external power once he cannot do as is expected of him, and his inner power will not sustain him in his time of need, as Moses bluntly tells him:

'That crown and that throne make you a Pharaoh, but inside that frame you are a man. And you are afraid. And I know you do not know what you are afraid of. Your fear is so vast that it has crumbled you inside. But for that you would have killed me weeks ago.'  
'Liar!' (Moses 214)

Hurston's concern is always with the inside. I'm often reminded of Conrad's character, Kurtz, who "was hollow at the core" (Conrad 97). Or T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow

Men". The question becomes, what and who are we without the trappings of office, the malignancy of oppression, the external forces of society? What inner strengths have we developed through our own experiences with life that will finally make us free, free to be just, wise, and benevolent, free to rejoice in our lives?

What is it that makes us who we are? For Hurston, let us say, who we are does not depend upon whether or not we belong to a certain racial or ethnic group. There are no such lines that can be drawn: "I began to laugh at both white and black who claimed special blessings on the basis of race" (Dust 235). And later speaking of Blacks she says, "And some will always be at the bottom, keeping company with other bottom-folks" (Dust 237). Whatever quibbles a person might have about the term "bottom-folk," the point here is that no one is naturally at the bottom or the top due to race, though they might be at the bottom due to oppression, as she argues in Moses, Man of the Mountain, in "Crazy for This Democracy," and throughout her work. Of course, then she turns the other cheek, arguing that the oppressed need to quit whining and rise above victimhood, if we, victims, are to be free.

And I say, we, because, in one way or another, our late 20th century society has created a population of

victims; everyone is crying, "Poor me; I'm a victim." If we aren't victimized because we are of a particular oppressed ethnic or racial group, then we are victimized by poverty, or because we are oppressed as women, or maybe our mothers didn't love us as much or enough, or our genes make us prone to alcoholism, or some sort of incestuous trauma made us "the way we are," and the list goes on. Hurston would remind us that while all these things may affect our behavior, we are, finally, responsible for our own freedom, that we must, through our own experiences, find out about life, and by force of our own will create our inside nature. I believe Hurston would find our present-day astuteness at abnegating responsibility ludicrous. She would look at us and sigh as Moses does as he considers the Hebrews: "they acted like they knew they were free by ear but they couldn't conceive of it. They did not believe they could take on any responsibility for themselves at all. They kept clamoring for somebody else to act for them" (Moses 248).

Hurston knows that the oppressed have something to overcome, a strike against them as it were, whether they are the Hebrews, the Blacks, a poor White Florida Cracker woman, or are claiming some other type of oppression. But when she writes about the petty weaknesses of the oppressed, I cannot help but believe

she wants the oppressed to understand their folly, and make themselves free. Why else would Alice Walker want all Black children to read Moses? The book certainly does not compliment the oppressed anymore than it does the power-hungry. When Hurston writes, "They committed every kind of folly and showed their inside weakness," she must want us to examine our insides and wonder about alternatives to folly (Moses 234). When she speaks of her people in her autobiography, she writes, "We will go where the internal drive carries us like everybody else" (Dust 237).

When I read her words, I have to chastise myself, else I begin to feel inadequate. I have not done a quarter of what she did with her life and my "oppressions" are far smaller. But then I remember that freedom is an internal thing; I remember Tea Cake, who by society's standards had not accomplished much; and I remember that Hurston tells us that he was doing just fine until he started feeling inadequate; feelings of inadequacy sowed the seeds of hatred that destroyed Tea Cake.

Zora Neale Hurston had every reason (more than ample by our present criteria) to cry, "Poor me!" and she chose not to. Showing incredible fortitude she climbed the mountains with Moses, refusing to stay behind and whine. When I read, "I do not belong to

the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it," my reaction is just short of reverence (Love Myself 152). Here is someone who probably has the greatest excuse for victimhood that our society recognizes, and she refuses to accept.

The above is quoted from her essay, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." She continues her line of reasoning: "Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less" (Love Myself 152). "The world is to the strong" sounds a bit Machiavellian, but considering the statement in the larger context of Hurston's writing, the complexity of her meaning becomes clearer. She nowhere says that strong means powerful or ruthless. Always her theme is to rejoice in our own lives, our own capabilities, our own cultures. Hurston has gone to great lengths to document her culture's art forms, their folk ways. Mules and Men may not speak of materially rich people, but Hurston sees them as rich in other ways and strong - strong in ways of survival.

Strength to Hurston includes belief in self, personal freedom, the kind of freedom that sees beyond external pressures and looks to internal values:

"Everybody has some special road of thought along which

they travel when they are alone to themselves. And his road of thought is what makes every man what he is" (Moses 101). These are Moses' thoughts as he leaves Egypt to find a new life. He has killed an Egyptian overseer; he realizes there is a plot afoot to discredit him, get rid of him, but he is not distressed. He has begun to "feel the cursing thought of law and power," and thinking about it all he concludes that he has "always felt the beneficence of law and power and never stopped to consider that it had another side" (Moses 99). With these things in mind he begins to yearn "for a country he had never seen," a country "where there would be more equality of opportunity and less difference between top and bottom" (Moses 100). Hurston speaks of "bottom people" and "the strong," but if we look to her work as a whole, we begin to understand passages we could otherwise misinterpret.

After bringing Moses to this point, Hurston is ready to make him a man without the external trappings of Egypt's power and wealth, a man who must rely on his own internal strengths. Moses crosses the Red Sea and becomes a new man, a man not defined by Egypt and royal palace. "Moses had crossed over. He was not in Egypt. He had crossed over and now he was not an Egyptian. He had crossed over" (Moses 103). Hurston does not stop

there; with that much explication of his crossing over, she continues for another half page, denuding Moses of all past extrinsic claims to power and authority. With the removal of each extrinsic, Hurston tells us again: "He had crossed over" (Moses 104). But as readers, we are not afraid; we already have faith in Moses's inside powers and Hurston reinforces that faith by telling us: "He was a man sitting on a rock" (Moses 104). Not only is this passage full of symbolism, fully in keeping with the subject matter, but it has a wonderfully biblical rhythm to it, or is it the rhythm of the Black spiritual?

Moses will marry Jethro's daughter, confer with Jethro and the Mountain, and become "the finest hoodoo man in the world," before he is ready to deliver the Hebrews from Pharaoh (Moses 147). But who will deliver them, each one, from his own personal bondage? As with Janie, Arvay, and Tea Cake, Hurston will again assert that the only way to be free is to free yourself. Hurston endows Moses with one of the grandest attributes of leadership: "He had no wish to impose his will on others" (Moses 303). But even this great leader must finally realize:

that no man may make another free. Freedom was something internal. The outside signs were just signs and symbols of the man inside. All you could do was to give the opportunity for freedom and the man himself must make his own emancipation. He

remembered how often he had had to fight Israel to halt a return to Egypt and slavery. Responsibility had seemed too awful to them time and time again. (Moses 344-345)

When, at the end of the cosmic forty-year purging of Israel, the people offer Moses a crown, he declines, sick to his heart that they would raise up a king among them. He warns them against the raising up of oppressors among themselves, knowing that "it's pretty hard to find a man who wouldn't weaken under the strain of power and get biggity and over-bearing" (Moses 327). The last pages of Moses are full of Hurston talking about freedom through Moses. It is as though she is raising her voice to all who would be free. And through Moses, she reminds us, she reminds her people, that "this freedom is a funny thing, . . . It ain't something permanent like rocks and hills. It's like manna; you just got to keep on gathering it fresh every day" (Moses 327). And lastly she reminds all those who might stumble upon someone having trouble realizing his own freedom: "You do not mock a man for being blind. . . You lead him" (Moses 347). That is exactly what Zora Neale Hurston attempted to do throughout her life.



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