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Were Their Eyes Watching the Ladies?: The Treatment of African American Women in Harlem Renaissance Literature

The literature of the Harlem Renaissance encompasses poems, stories, plays, and novels that are highly relevant and conducive to a culturally-motivatedculturally motivated dialogue on race consciousness and racial identity. Topics that were once taboo—miscegenation, biracial families, sexuality, homosexuality, city nightlife, interracial conflict, and passing—began to surface in texts where the situations of fictional characters mirrored the real-life struggles of African Americans in the United States. In an effort to correct the stereotypes and negative images prevalent in American culture and society, the writers and scholars of the Harlem Renaissance produced art and theory that more sincerely and accurately rendered their marginalized race. However, in the midst of this newly heightened awareness, African American women remained, and still do remain, a mistreated people. Most trailblazers of the period overlooked the tenuous dynamic between the sexes in favor of a seemingly larger argument between the races. As such, the treatment of African American women remained largely the same both before and after the Harlem Renaissance.

In this paper, I will examine the ways in which the literature of this period presents African American female characters as, what Zora Neale Hurston dubs, "mules of the world," and the manners in which these characters respond to such treatment (14). In addition, I will explore the reasons for these characters' specific responses by analyzing the novels' individual authorship.

In the novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston introduces this phrase through her character, Janie Crawford, to signify the abuse of African American women throughout history. Early on, the young protagonist is educated by her grandmother in the unfortunate ways of the world. After Janie is caught kissing a young man, Nanny delivers a speech in which she acknowledges,

> Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de 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**. (14) [emphasis added]

As the sole guardian and only advocate of her granddaughter's wellbeing, Nanny speaks with an abundance of fear; fear that Janie will be used and abused as Janie's mother was, and will wind up pregnant and alone without the support and protection of a husband. Hurston makes a deliberate choice in having Nanny describe the mule as analogous to an African American woman. Critic Julie Haurykiewicz elaborates on the mule's symbolism in her article, "From Mules to Muliebrity: Speech and Silence in *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*" She writes, "Hurston's choice of this animal is significant considering its constitution and connotations. The mule is an animal of mixed parentage (donkey and horse), usually the offspring of a jackass and a mare. Mules are frequently sterile and are employed as beasts of burden to labor for their masters" (45). Mules are generally cheap and used for the transport of goods and people. They can be trained into subservience to fulfill a role as the tool or means to accomplish a task and to assume the status of possession. A mule is not a pet that is shown affection and attention,

domesticated, and treated as a member of the family. It is a harassed and harnessed animal that garners little respect. An examination of Janie's three marriages illustrates Nanny's provocative phrase.

As Janie emerges into womanhood and develops a sense of her own sexuality, Nanny does not want man after man to take advantage of her granddaughter's curiosity and naïveté. At first, Janie is distraught that she cannot marry for love. The sixteen-year-old has romantic notions about the union of two people that are not farfetched daydreams intended for a locked diary. Janie realizes the emotional factor involved in any intimate relationship, particularly those that are physically intimate. Hurston writes,

> She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and then ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch reaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. (11)

In this scene, Janie identifies with the tree and its blossoms in such a way that her connection allows her to have an orgasmic experience when the blooms are pollinated. For Janie, this simulation of sexual intercourse is not merely a physical sensation, but an emotional one as well. She understands that there is something very special about any union between two individuals.

Janie's grandmother marries her off to Logan Killicks, an older man in the community, because of the stability and protection he will offer her granddaughter. Janie is disappointed in

her marriage because she does not have an emotional attachment to him in the way that she believes is essential. Immediately, she resolves, "Yes, she would love Logan after they were married," but no love comes about (21). She tells Nanny about her desire for something more substantial in the relationship, but Nanny is completely flummoxed about Janie's inability to appreciate what she *is* gaining from the marriage. Nanny says,

> 'If you don't want him, you sho oughta. Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo' parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road and…Lawd have mussy! Dat's de very prong all us black women gits hung on. Dis love! Dat's just whut's got us uh pullin' and uh haulin' and sweatin' and doin' from can't see in de mornin' till can't see at night.' (23)

Janie remains a mule to the marriage because she leaves her feelings and desires unexpressed. She swallows her craving for love because she is told it is extraneous and inconsequential to a successful union. Janie neglects to make her needs known just as a mule does not complain or resist when its comfort is ignored. Although she manages to leave the marriage when the opportunity finally presents itself, she has already compromised her vision and denied its personal significance to her.

In a parallel situation, another African American female character actually expresses her desires, but is turned away like a child. In the short story "Esther," from Jean Toomer's Cane, the protagonist develops ideas about love as a young woman. King Barlo is a prophet to her. He is a mystical visionary in the community capable of foreseeing the Middle Passage, the salvation of blacks. He leaves town and she dreams of him. When he returns, Esther resolves to tell him she loves him. She travels to Nat Bowle's house where Barlo socializes with other questionable

townsfolk. On her way, she denies herself any remotely self-indulgent thoughts Barlo. Toomer writes,

> She will not permit herself to notice the peculiar phosphorescent glitter of the sweet-gum leaves. Their movement would excite her. Exciting too, the recession of the dull familiar homes she knows so well. She doesn't know them at all. She closes her eyes, and holds them tightly. Won't do. Her being aware that they are closed recalls her purpose. She does not want to think of it. She opens them…Crossing the street at the corner of McGregor's notion shop, she thinks that the windows are a dull flame. Only a fancy. She walks faster. Then runs. (26)

The imagined flaming windows reveal a sense of passion that Esther suppresses. She is keenly aware of what and how she feels, but is nervous and perhaps even ashamed because she may be rejected and she thinks such feelings are sinful and inappropriate. Esther nearly faints when she arrives at her destination and is described as "a frightened child" when Barlo first sees her and speaks (27). Barlo addresses her as "'lil milk-white gal,'" and tells her, "'This ain't th place fer y" (26-7). Like Janie, Esther is regarded as a child though she is nearly thirty-years-old. However, Esther does express her intentions as clearly as possible when she says, "'But I've come for you'…[and] she manages to look deep and straight into his eyes" (27). Although Esther's censored version of the truth is not a confession of raw feelings, it reveals her fear that honesty will be too much to give up to Barlo. Regardless, "guffaws and giggles break out from all around the room" and Barlo suddenly appears to have the upper hand (27). Esther leaves, thus allowing her desire for an intimate or sexual relationship with Barlo to be the butt of everyone's jokes. She allowed her whole world to fall apart the very instant she was denied a fulfillment of those desires. "She steps out. There is no air, no street, and the town has completely disappeared"

(27). Esther is a mule because she does not give her desires the complete gusto and forwardness they deserve. She is seemingly bullied into making mild or bland the things she feels with passion.

In both Janie's situation with Logan and Esther's with Barlo, the female characters unknowingly surrender their personal freedom and power to the male characters. They allow what is most urgent and crucial to them to be minimized in such a way that they are also reduced to mules in the process. In her book of essays and speeches, Sister Outsider, Audre Lorde closely examines the social and psychological issues facing African American women of the past and present. In one essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde shines a light on the compulsion of many women to separate their erotic and rational selves. She writes,

> But the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough. The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves…To refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however comfortable that might seem, is to deny a large part of the experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd. (54, 59)

Ultimately, Janie does leave her marriage to Logan and Esther does walk away from Barlo and the crowd, but before that happens, these women are not entirely invested in what they are claiming to feel. At some point in both situations, these women deny their longing for the sake of

maintaining outward appearances. For Janie, this denial is apparent when Hurston describes the passing time and the predictability of the young woman's silent acceptance. She writes, "So Janie waited a bloom time, and a green time and an orange time…She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie's first dream was dead, so she became a woman" (25). Here, Janie concludes that she does not have the power to infuse her own life with intense meaning. Similarly, Esther becomes completely detached from herself, and Toomer says she is "like a somnambulist" (27). She is "frozen" just before she escapes the crowd and, as such, she cannot claim a sense of purpose and forwardness as her own (27). Neither woman asserts the strength and acceptability of her desire and, in neglecting to do so, negates a huge part of herself: her erotic power.

Toomer's personal influence cannot be denied here. As with all authors, it is safe to say Toomer writes from a place of knowledge, experience, and imagination. Although the characters and scenario of "Esther" cannot be equated so clearly and definitively with aspects of Toomer's psyche, they may be understood as part in parcel of his sexuality and perspective. In his book, Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer and Nella Larsen, Charles Larson examines the writer's interactions with women. He writes,

> Toomer was a bit of a louse, at least where women were concerned. He went through them by the dozens, possibly by the hundreds. Although this is an exaggeration, people who knew him say that no woman was safe once she entered a room where Jean was present. Thousands of women thought they were in love with him, one of his acquaintances informed me, extending the hyperbole even further. 'He loved to screw,' Jean's medical doctor bluntly told me, though he quickly added that Jean was not a rascal in most of his relationships. 'He was very

> much a body type…charged with the mystery of life,' a magnetic and feeling sort of person with characteristics which women often found irresistible. Friends admit, however, that he used his blackness – at least the myth of his blackness – in his seductions. (198-99)

This suggests a close resemblance between Toomer and Barlo. After all, it is the mystery and seeming power of the latter that attracts a young Esther to him in the first place. So then, what of the humiliation and ridicule handed to the woman when she expresses her desire? Short of conducting an interview with the late Toomer, one can only speculate about his direct influence on Barlo's disregard for Esther. Larson suggests a relationship between the author's associations with his mother and those with his lovers. He draws on factual evidence when he deduces, "Jean's sexual promiscuity was…rooted in his ambivalent attitude toward his mother, [because when she remarried,] she left her son with the feeling of abandonment…It isn't difficult to see the pattern reemerging in his own adulthood in Jean's cavalier attitude toward women" (199). When Barlo is inconsiderate of Esther's desire and the risk she takes in expressing it, he communicates a detachment that mirrors one of Toomer's own defense mechanisms; psychologically, it is easier to reject before being rejected. The author's propensity for philandering, from purported affairs with Georgia O'Keefe to Edna St. Vincent Millay, reveals his finely tuned ability to advance or withdraw, to give or withhold himself in a way that prevents him from being abandoned. Curiously, Toomer writes "Esther" from the perspective of the young woman, whose whole world vanishes, thus illustrating his familiarity with the scenario of rejection. While crafting a story where the female assumes the abused role of the mule, Toomer writes her with veiled empathy that the audience as readers and interpreters cannot overlook.

Janie's second marriage to Jody Starks is the cause and effect of her first marriage's termination. Jody presents her with a different idea of matrimony: one where she is honored and respected. He tells her, "'Ah wants to make a wife outa you…You ain't never knowed what it was to be treated lak a lady and Ah wants to be de one tuh show yuh,'" and Janie believes this more closely resembles her ideal marriage (29). In an essay titled "Sexual Politics and the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston," from the book, The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom, feminist critic Barbara Smith identifies Janie's new love interest as a symbol of something larger. She writes, "When the prosperous looking Jody Starks happens along the road and talks prettily to her, he seems to offer a means of escape. Janie runs off with him, filled with hopes of recapturing her romantic dreams" (35). Indeed, the young woman is eager for a relationship of her own choosing.

It is not long before Jody imposes his expectations and demands on Janie. He treats her as an employee—cheap labor in his new store and post office—and belittles her when she resists or errs. He does not even develop a rapport with her, his wife, which shows he has no intention of building a successful relationship with her. Janie notices this when the people of Eatonville declare Jody the mayor and request that Janie deliver some positive words. Jody interrupts before she can answer for herself, and says, "'Thank yuh fuh yo' compliments, but mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home'" (43). Janie's reaction is described, "It must have been the way Joe spoke without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another that took the bloom off of things. But anyway, she went down the road behind him that night feeling cold. He strode along invested with his new dignity, thought and planned out loud, unconscious of her thoughts" (43). At this point, Janie realizes she is, what Smith suggests, "merely one of his possessions, a

beautiful status symbol," and is not something for which Jody will ever foster love because he is too consumed by his own need to acquire and maintain ownership of the best of everything (35).

Janie remains in the relationship for twenty-plus years and all the while, adheres to Jody's every demand just as an employee receives instructions from her boss. When her husband determines her hair is a source of excitement for other men in the community, he insists she tie it up and cover it. When the townsmen gather on the front porch of the store and tell jokes and stories, he prohibits her from participating and even from listening, and forcefully raises her to a status to which she does not consent. Hurston writes,

> Janie loved the conversation and sometimes she thought up good stories on the mule, but Joe had forbidden her to indulge. He didn't want her talking after such trashy people. 'You'se Mrs. Mayor Starks, Janie. I god, Ah can't see what uh woman uh yo' stability would want tuh be treasurin' all dat gum-grease from folks dat don't even own de house dey sleep in. 'Tain't no earthly use' (53-4).

By excluding her from the town's social life, Jody isolates his wife and retires her to a figurative glass case as he would a trophy. He defines and constructs a role he expects her to assume as his wife, though that role prevents her from living fully and acting and reacting as a character susceptible to personal decision-making and consequence. Janie becomes Jody's puppet, an outlet for his pride and ego and, he believes, a surefire indication of his well-roundedness as a man. He can advance this image of his success because he has achieved every desirable component of life: "love," status, wealth, and power. Janie is a mule to Jody in this relationship because she abides by her husband's physical demands. However, on another level, Janie accepts the role Jody wants her to fill for two decades without question. Just as a mule or a piece of farm equipment is purchased or obtained for a long-term purpose, so is Janie fixed as an investment

for Jody's advancement. He will keep her, just as he would keep a mule, for as long as she is useful to his far-reaching cause.

Similarly, another African American female character is relegated to a specific role or status, but in this case, to enhance the author's premeditated plot and didactic message. Maggie Ellersley, from Jessie Fauset's There Is Confusion, is one such convenient figure. In a novel like Fauset's, a variety of characters are depicted as a means of illustrating both positive and negative examples of African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance. The second phase of the renaissance revolved around ameliorating many of the stereotypes rampant in European American belief systems. Fauset's leading characters, the classy and scholarly Marshall family, are highly motivated and represent African American success in an exemplary fashion. Many critics have posited this depiction as propagandistic; mainly because the average African American family of the time would not have had the means to sustain such a lifestyle. Maggie Ellersley, an ambitious but underprivileged character, appears to be Fauset's attempt to portray a realistically intelligent and devoted African American with an unfortunate set of circumstances and obstacles between her and her potential success.

Maggie first advances her economic standing when she convinces her mother to relocate to a larger home so that they may open a boarding house and transform it into a business venture. Fauset describes, "Miraculously the scheme worked. It gave Maggie her first insight into the workings of life. If you wanted things, you thought and thought about them, and when an opportunity offered, there you were with your mind made up to jump at it" (62). Through Maggie's attitude and resulting action, Fauset promotes an alternative to poverty, unemployment, and hardship. She establishes a character, Maggie, who does not rest until she achieves

substantial progress. At the same time, however, Fauset's character makes mistakes that have huge impacts on her life, leave her with difficult consequences, and force her to persevere.

When Maggie receives Joanna's spiteful letter, a request that Maggie withdraw the romantic affection she has for Philip, she responds impetuously and marries Henderson Neal, an infamous gambler unbeknownst to Maggie. The truth of his livelihood is finally revealed to her and she leaves him, but not before he threatens to kill her. Fauset's plot twists and turns until Maggie is engaged to Peter Bye, nearly killed by Henderson Neal, unengaged to Peter, and finally loving and nursing to health her first love, Philip, when she travels to Chambéry to administer medical aid to African American soldiers in war. Just before she reunites with Philip, Fauset elucidates Maggie's revised sense of self, a way of revealing that character's ability to overcome the odds. Fauset writes,

> Her newfound independence was a source of the greatest joy. Each night she mapped out afresh her future life. When she returned to America she would start her hair work again, she would inaugurate a chain of Beauty Shops…Of her ability to make a good living she had no doubt. And she would gather about her, friends, simple kindly people whom she liked for themselves: who would seek her company with no thought of patronage. She would stand on her two feet, Maggie Ellersley, serene, independent, self-reliant. The idea exalted her and she went about her work the picture of optimism and happiness. (261-62)

Maggie's experiences throughout <u>There Is Confusion</u> confirm her purpose in and contribution to the novel and Fauset's intentions. She is not a character Fauset spent time listening to and fashioning accordingly, but is the product of a message-driven text where her actions and their consequences are staged to support a specific set of beliefs. Maggie is constructed to represent

the transformation of the "common folk" of the race. She is deprived of a stable background not because hardship is inherent to her character, but because such circumstances give the author the opportunity to prove how an individual may navigate an unfortunate life and arrive at respectability.

In her essay, "Femininity, Publicity, and the Class Division of Cultural Labor: Jessie Redmon Fauset's *There is Confusion*," Nina Miller examines Maggie's role in a different light, one that does not directly suggest the character is the propagandistic creation of the author. First, Miller speaks in a general sense when she writes,

> Under girding many cultural 'performances' is a symbiosis of femininity, a network of feminine 'others' which provides a context of possibility for a relatively stable bourgeois heroine. In this textual economy, bourgeois women got help managing the dynamics of public performance from their (imaginary) working-class as well as their (imaginary) peasant-class sisters. (207)

This idea, what Miller later terms *enabling*, allows Maggie to be considered as a character that balances and complements Joanna. While the latter enters a career where she risks an association of her name with tastelessness, a character such as Maggie draws attention to the fact that the class system remains intact. In other words, Joanna has the privilege Maggie lacks and that prevents Joanna from falling below her class standards. Maggie is still more susceptible to tastelessness simply because she represents a certain class of people in the novel. Even in light of Miller's hypothesis, does Maggie not remain a structural mule in the novel?[1] The critic further elucidates her theory when she speculates, "In her capacity as (in essence) a 'girl of the streets,' Maggie is a magnet for the distress and volatility of life in public and, hence, the structurally

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[1] If I am to concur with Miller's theory, I must also consider the possibility that both Maggie *and* Joanna are mules to Fauset's propagandistic intention in that they are the divergence of one character type into two class distinctions.

enabling condition for Joanna's own pursuit of a stage career that is sanctified and safely bourgeois" (207-8). As such, any downfalls linked to public visibility—stalking, exploitation, failed romance, loss of financial resources—become issues with which Maggie copes and overcomes. There is a decisive split between the hardships Fauset hands to the two characters and their classes in her novel.

In Their Eyes Were Watching God, Janie marries a third time, a man named Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods. They meet after Janie's second husband dies and immediately following their acquaintance they embark on a life of shared experiences, something entirely new and appealing to Janie. Tea Cake teaches her to play checkers; they tell stories and jokes in the evenings on Janie's front porch; they fish after midnight; they cook together; they attend the town picnic as a couple; Tea Cake helps Janie learn to drive. It is not surprising when the two leave Eatonville and marry. They travel to Jacksonville and then journey to the Everglades to farm on the muck with others they quickly befriend. Their relationship is a positive union characterized by mutual love. This is most apparent when Tea Cake begins work, but takes time to visit Janie during the day. Hurston describes the verbal exchange when Janie discovers how much Tea Cake misses her during the day. He goes a step further to ask her to work with him on the muck because he longs for her company. This marriage is the most genuine and nurturing one in which Janie has involved herself.

A noteworthy scene arises when Mrs. Turner, a very light-skinned African American who detests Tea Cake for his blackness and adores Janie for her lightness, suggests Janie meet her brother. Tea Cake overhears from the next room and is angered by Mrs. Turner's deliberate

attempt to sever his marriage with Janie. The brother visits the muck the following season and Tea Cake feels threatened. Hurston details his reaction when she writes,

> Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss. Everybody talked about it next day in the fields. It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. (147)

Mules, like any other work animal that is owned, are often subject to their masters' need to establish authority. Usually early on, a master will physically demonstrate the fact that he is at the top of the hierarchy and the mule is at the bottom. Occasionally, he will remind the animal so that his power is not threatened. Similarly, Tea Cake uses Janie as his means for reaffirming his masculinity and reassuring him of his control within their relationship. He is compelled to hurt her in a way that she will not soon forget so that he might feel more secure about her commitment to fidelity. Hurston does not address Janie's reaction to the violence, so it is imagined there is nothing significant to be said for it. However, what *is* significant is Janie's undying and unconditional love for Tea Cake even after the incident.

A severe hurricane strikes the Everglades and after struggling to safety, Tea Cake asks Janie if she is still pleased with their union. She responds, "'Once upon uh time, Ah never 'spected nothin', Tea Cake, but bein' dead from the standin' still and tryin' tuh laugh. But you come 'long and make something' outa me. So Ah'm thankful fuh anything we come through together'" (167). She maintains sincere love for her husband even when he grows very sick with rabies, accuses her of wrongdoing, and shoots her in his insanity. And when she shoots him back, she does so in a loving effort to "rid [him] of that mad dog that was in him…But she hadn't

wanted to kill him…She couldn't ever want to be rid of him" (187). Soon after she is found not guilty of murdering her husband, Janie returns to her hometown and tells her best friend, Pheoby, of her grand love. Hurston explains Janie's belief when she writes, "He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall" (193). This excerpt makes it clear that Janie needed and continues to need the love she fostered with Tea Cake. After two unsuccessful and damaging relationships, she arrives at one that brings her an abundance of joy. Tea Cake has given her a definition of love; a beautiful, concrete, fun, and romantic actuality for which she had both longed and searched her entire life. From these descriptions of her immeasurable happiness, it is no surprise Janie does not begrudge Tea Cake for the slapping on the muck. To hold that against him would be to deny herself a love she cannot do without.

In a similar vein, Irene Redfield, from Nella Larsen's Passing, compromises her own dignity in order to fulfill a need. She is keenly aware of her husband's restlessness and alludes to her own uneasiness when she finds him in a certain mood. Having once fought him on his desire to relocate the family to Brazil, Irene lives with the fear that something will set him off and he will leave her to pursue a different career in South America. There is visible tension between the two when the unresolved issue surfaces one morning. Brian is unhappy as a physician in New York, but Irene insists it is the lifestyle most suited to the wellbeing of the entire family. When he grows restless and agitated, Irene panics. Larsen writes,

> Hadn't his success proved that she'd been right in insisting that he stick to his profession right there in New York? Couldn't he see, even now, that it *had* been best? Not for her, oh no, not for her – she had never really considered herself – but for him and the boys. Was she never to be free of it, that fear which crouched,

> always, deep down within her, stealing away the sense of security, the feeling of permanence, from the life which she had so admirably arranged for them all, and desired so ardently to have remain as it was? (57)

Irene's fear of change and uncertainty overwhelm her at moments like these. She realizes that for all the control she has managed, she is still unable to fully control her husband's tendency toward dissatisfaction with his life. She recognizes that their marriage is her saving grace and the only guarantee that he will not seek out his aspirations in Brazil, but will remain the support for his family.[2]

It is when Irene suspects Brian is having an affair with Irene's high school friend, Clare Kendry, that she feels her security is most threatened. At first, Larsen portrays Irene as simultaneously shocked and crushed. The author writes, "Within her she felt a hardness from feeling, not absent, but repressed. And that hardness was rising, swelling…She shook her head, unable to speak, for there was a choking in her throat, and the confusion in her mind was like the beating of wings" (89-91). Irene cries briefly and regains composure, and her reaction seems both predictable and appropriate. In a matter of a few hours, the reality of her new situation sets in and she reacts involuntarily, dropping a cup of tea onto the rug.

> Her whole body went taut. In that second she saw that she could bear anything, but only if no one knew that she had anything to bear. It hurt. It frightened her, but she could bear it…It hurt. It hurt like hell. But it didn't matter if no one knew. If everything could go on as before. If the boys were safe. It did hurt. But it didn't matter. (94-5)

[2] In this sense, Brian has been a mule to the marriage all along. While it is important to acknowledge the restrictions imposed on him, a full analysis of his situation would be best reserved for an entirely separate paper.

At the celebration for Hugh Wentworth, Irene begins to make a decision that she concretizes a few days later. Just before she leaves for Felise's party with Brian and Clare, Irene reaffirms her priorities. Larsen writes,

> Security. Was it just a word? If not, then was it only by the sacrifice of other things, happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known, that it could be obtained?...In spite of her searchings and feel of frustration, she was aware that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life. Not for any of the others, or for all of them, would she exchange it. She wanted only to be tranquil. Only, unmolested, to be allowed to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband. (107)

After determining the importance of stability and security in her marriage and family life, Irene acknowledges a lack of love for Brian. For her, he has been a source of emotional and financial support, not to mention a companion with whom she created and raised her children. However, she is not driven to feel anything more for him than appreciation for what he has provided. Larsen explains, "Nevertheless, she meant to keep him…She still intended to hold fast to the outer shell of her marriage, to keep her life fixed, certain…Better, far better, to share him than to lose him completely. Oh, she could close her eyes, if need be" (107-8). In this instant, Irene becomes a mule to her marriage. She is perfectly willing to compromise her own dignity and avoid a confrontation with her husband because it means she will not lose the stability of her carefully structured life. She recognizes the cross she bears in Larsen's description,

> Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a

> woman, an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and undeserved. (98)

Irene is confronted with two realities, two identities: to be an African American and a woman at the same time. Having never questioned either, she is suddenly thrust into a situation where the definition and security of both are threatened. In an effort to prevent herself from spinning out of control, Irene swallows her pride in the name of survival. Like a mule, she will spinelessly tolerate and endure any injustice.[3]

Interestingly enough, critic Claudia Tate observes that not every study notes the significance of Larsen's duality of plot in Passing. Her essay, "Nella Larsen's *Passing*: A Problem of Interpretation," explores the possibility that the novel's climax is not one of race or racial identity. She suggests, "The real impetus for the story is Irene's emotional turbulence, which is entirely responsible for the course that the story takes and ultimately accountable for the narrative ambiguity" (143). Through this understanding of the novel, Tate emphasizes Larsen's attention to her protagonist and the protagonist's innermost feelings. The depths of that character's consciousness are intimately explored, especially during those instances when Irene confesses a lack of love for her husband but the desperation to maintain a marriage with him. Larsen's voice merges with Irene's in a scene like this and it is apparent that the author writes Irene's perspective with compassion. To thoroughly probe the mind of a fictional character is to study the self in a removed fashion. Thadious Davis expands on this idea in her book, Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance, when she claims, "in Irene, Larsen found a vehicle for deconstructing her responses to herself as a woman of color, to her mother as a white woman, and to the family as an institutional and emotional structure" (314). Irene, then, experiences a

[3] I will suggest here that Irene will also *commit* any injustice, as we suspect from Clare's death scene. Irene's need to maintain stability at all costs strays from the mule theme I have presented thus far. As such, I hesitate to explore it in depth in this paper, though it does pose an interesting counterargument.

culmination of Larsen's foremost concerns: she reconsiders her racial allegiance, explores the feelings associated with passing and its illusion of white skin, and struggles with her need for security within a carefully constructed family unit. Irene is representative and symbolic as a light-skinned African American woman often mistaken for a white woman.

The link between writer and character poses an interesting question, though: how does Irene's desire and willingness to maintain stability (at the cost of becoming a mule) reflect Larsen's deconstruction of herself? Davis again offers a cogent connection when she suggests,

> Larsen's theme of jealousy and rivalry for the affections of a husband…are based on an immediate situation in her life. Her own husband was seeing another woman who was, in fact, white. Larsen made the discovery while she was at work on Passing, but she did not confront [her husband], who had seemed to be an ideal husband for her. Despite her personal surprise and hurt, she chose, instead, to conceal her knowledge of the affair and…to pretend that nothing was wrong. (324)

This seems startlingly simple. The character is presented as a mule to her marriage because the author is a mule to her marriage. Irene's acceptance of Brian's infidelity is not an illustration of anything but the truth. In this case, behind the fictitious mule-role of one woman is the factual mule-role of another.

Through this exploration, I have found that any conclusion at which I wanted, hoped, or expected to arrive now evades me. I cannot string together the novels of Hurston, Toomer, Fauset, and Larsen like uniform beads; they are too different and are derived from sources too complex to turn into the necklace of my thesis. Yes, I have provided examples of and parallels

between the varied mistreatments of the African American woman in Harlem Renaissance literature. But no, I cannot say the evidence I have compiled is sufficient to merit any kind of broad statement about gender's place, or lack thereof, during this specific time period. No amount of evidence could support that because there is nothing necessarily impressive or empowering about the portrayals of African American women that came before and after the Harlem Renaissance. It is hard to know when and where a gender renaissance will emerge, and it is even harder to know how or if gender *and* race will intersect in that renaissance.

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