

An Analysis of Hurston's Consistency with Her Original Aspiration and Mission in *Seraph on the Suwanee*

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Abstract—*Seraph on the Suwanee*, Zora Neale Hurston's last published long novel in 1948, depicting a white story, attracted almost no scholarly attention but much criticism for her pandering to white readers, betraying her previous characteristic themes in novel writing and abandoning her black cultural tradition and stance. This thesis aims to dig out the themes of the novel *Seraph* and the blackness behind the whiteness to find out that *Seraph*, in fact suffering wrong, tells a story by white faces with black voices, which demonstrates that Hurston continues her cultural stance and never changes her idea of not only employing black culture tradition but also insisting on her themes of writing as her previous novels.

Index Terms—*Seraph on the Suwanee*, consistency, themes, esthetic sources

I. INTRODUCTION

Zora Neale Hurston (1891?-1960), a black woman writer, folklorist and anthropologist, was best known as “the mother of black female literature” in the twentieth-century literary history in America. Born and bred in the south, Hurston was immersed in the rich and colorful black cultural traditions since her childhood. She loved her nation deeply, knew her national culture well, and was proud of her black identity. Significantly, she turned her deep love and pride of the culture of their race into words including more than 50 short stories, plays and folklores such as *Spunk* (1925), *Sweat* (1926), *Color Struck* (1926), *The Great Day* (1932), *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My House* (1938), all of which more or less integrated the unique cultural traditions of the black race and further enhanced the dissemination of authentic black culture. Besides, she dedicated herself to create and publish several long novels such as *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948). In most of her works, Hurston, on the one hand, employed black dialect, folk songs, folk dances, folk tales as well as religious rituals in order to recuperate the African-American roots and on the other, she usually highlighted the theme in her novels to expose the oppression and repression of gender, race and class. However, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, the last long novel of Hurston, published in 1948, has never drawn much attention among scholars. For one thing, *Seraph*, unlike Hurston's previous novels, shaped the white as the protagonists such as a passive, withdrawal, timid and obedient woman protagonist Arvay very different from Jane and Lucy in other works; for another, it is criticized for its “betrayal of the writer's commitment to foreground black culture and individual black experience” (Dubek, 1996, p. 344). This paper tends to dig out all of the blackness behind the whiteness in terms of the themes and the esthetic sources in order to prove Hurston's consistency with her previous works: She never abandoned her unique esthetic of black culture tradition and continued exposing the discrimination and oppression of women in the patriarchal society as well as the woman protagonist's struggle for self-discovery and fulfilment.

II. THEMES AS USUAL

Critics in the literary world should fully know Hurston's principles, processes, and publications of her writing so much so that the novel *Seraph* would not be neglected and even condemned. It is well known that Hurston obviously and directly depicts black dialect, folk songs, folk dances, folk tales as well as religious rituals in most of her works. *Seraph* still focuses on lower class, oppressed race, female growth, gender discrimination. Objectively, misread by some critics, *Seraph* is far from being “reactionary, static, shockingly misguided and timid” but “reiterates Hurston's characteristic themes” (Hemenway, 1977, p. xvi).

A. Lower Class

Seraph opens at the turn of the twentieth century in Sawley, a poverty-stricken town in west Florida on the famous Suwanee River. However, whether in the south or the north, few of these fields were intensively cultivated and developed. The life in the town mainly revolves in the production of turpentine and lumber around the sawmill and the turpentine still. Hurston describes Sawley as a place where “there was ignorance and poverty, and the ever-present hookworm” (Hurston, 1948, p. 1) and “Work was hard, pleasures few, and malaria and hookworm plentiful” (Hurston,

1948, p. 2). The people were mostly occupied in the production of turpentine and lumber. "They are born in teppentime, live all their lives in it and die and go to their graves smelling of teppentime." (Hurston, 1948, p. 8)

Brock Henson, Arvay's father "had never made as much as a hundred dollars in any month in his life" (Hurston, 1948, p. 8). Life for the Henson family was not that easy. Henson's family lived in a clapboard house, which had been a dark ugly red and now a rusty, splotchy gray-brown, with bare and skinny rafters.

The male protagonist, Jim Meserve, "whose ancestors had held plantations upon the Alabama River before the War" (Hurston, 1948, p. 7) and whose father had had no chance even to inherit because "the fortunes of the War wiped Jim's grand-father clean" (Hurston, 1948, p. 7), came to Sawley with only a small bundle, containing his changing clothes, and then found himself a job as a woodsman on the turpentine camp. They all were living in a lower social position, suffering poverty.

B. *Oppressed Race*

The novel, *Seraph*, was widely criticized because it was thought of as one that deviated from the black race. However, Hurston penetrates the black race into the plot and characters all the time. After the protagonists, Arvay and Jim gave birth to their first child, they moved to Citrabelle where Jim started his business with his "negro friend" Joe, as their servant, working for them.

Arvay, owing to her ethnic prejudice, looked down upon black people and felt dissatisfied with Joe and his family. She cried for Jim that "I know so well that you don't think I got no sense, and my folks don't amount to a hill of beans in your sight... Even niggers is better than we is, according to your mind. Joe Kelsey's word stands higher than mine any old day" (Hurston, 1948, p. 126). Arvay, though born in a poor white family, a "white cracker" from the lower class, was deeply impacted by the tradition of the idea of racial superiority and deep-rooted racial discrimination in South America--so much so that she disregarded black people to hostilely call them "niggers".

Outwardly, Jim held an intimate relationship with Joe and trusted him very much, who are willing to ask for Joe's advice in terms of marriage, life and business. Essentially, Jim, as a representative of the white at the turn of the century, who has had already a certain status by making his efforts, treated individual negro servants as pets, faithful, loyal and dependable, but he couldn't regard all black people as equally as he could treat the white. Black people were just pets, servants and helpers to support them, to advocate them and to work for them. Although black people are put into the background, Hurston, from the characters to the plots, exposes her great concern to her race and at the same time conveys the resistance of black people to the racial inequality in many aspects through dramatic irony.

C. *Female Growth*

Seraph, so far unrecognized, is "a narrative of resistance and self-discovery that exists not between the lines but solidly on every page" (Clair, 1989, p. 38). The female protagonist, Arvay, was born in the family, where Brock Henson, her father always showed his preference for her old sister Lorraine Henson, more robust and aggressive, who usually bullied Arvay. What's more, the people in Sawley were eager to play tricks on her, and the community put her down as queer as well. Further, many a man in the town felt that "he could put plenty of meat on Arvay's bones" (Hurston, 1948, p. 4). Consequently, all of these made Arvay feel timid, unconfident and unsafe inside. However, what Arvay had experienced in her childhood also helped her grow gradually. In *Seraph*, she made up her mind "that she had given her whole heart and her life to the work of God" (Hurston, 1948, p. 4) and participated actively in church work, actually, in order to protect herself till she met Jim Meserve, who married her later.

Marriage helped begin another journey for Arvay in her life, where she gradually struggled to be independent, determined and confident. Firstly, Arvay did not submit to Jim with his rudeness and male chauvinism but stuck to an independent one in the marriage life. She dared to challenge Jim to struggle against a life of repression. When she could not stand his toying with women outside, she managed to follow him around all day long; and when she got to know him was dancing with other women, she tried to persuade him to leave and asked to be respected. Oppressed in the family, she fell into deep loneliness and alienation, but she didn't give up. Secondly, Arvay made her views known on the affairs of her children. Although she was completely excluded and hurt by her children, who didn't follow what their mother said and stuck to themselves, Arvay, as a mother, on the one hand, expressed her care and love to her daughter and son, and on the other, she couldn't hide her desire to be respected and to be listened to. Thirdly, Arvay became brave and strong-minded because Lorraine and Carl attempt to ransack what her mother left to her. When she returned to Sawley to take care of her dying mother, who denigrated herself all her life, Arvay was determined to speak for her. Later, she handled her mother's funeral with the help of the community, but her sister's family were indifferent to her mother at the time. On knowing that Arvay's old sister and sister-in-law, poor but greedy, attempted to ransack all her mother left, Arvay lavished her gifts to the neighbors and donated the land her mother left to the local government as a park. She decided freely to give instead of passively allowing people to take from her. Fourthly, Arvay woke up from what she experienced to realize her independence. When Arvay went back to Jim from Sawley, she became tolerant, active, pleasant, which surprised Jim. Then, she asked to go out on the trip with Jim. Arvay, wearing herself "a pair of blue jeans that fishermen wore, two blue shirts, and the tall rubber sea-boots" (Hurston, 1948, p. 323), crossed the safety zone and headed into the deep ocean. She clasped tightly around Jim's neck and kissed and him fondly without being urged. Arvay was not an Arvay who had depended on her husband and given in to him, but an Arvay who could cross the dangerous sea with her husband together and even give him comfort, help and protection. "Arvay struggles to

reclaim control of her life from Jim and the seemingly invincible social forces that support him.” (Clair, 1989, p. 42)

D. *Unequal Gender*

In the novel *Seraph*, Hurston portrayed the male image Jim like most male characters in her other novels such as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. The male protagonist, Jim, exposed his chauvinism in words and behaviors later although the female protagonist, Arvey, really spent some beautiful days with her husband Jim at the beginning of their marriage. Jim spoke to Arvey like making a speech when he proposed to her:

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, and have him as many boy-children as he figgers he'd like to have, and make him so happy that he's willing to work and fetch in every dad-blamed thing that his wife thinks she would like to have. That's what women are made for. (Hurston, 1948, p. 25)

Actually, just as Jim declared that he was the only one in the family who had the right to speak, he took his wife as his own property, scolding, blustering and roaring anytime and anywhere. He, not only, burst into anger and drove her away with violence when Arvey saw he danced with other women and persuaded him to leave, but also he, after he went back, went straight to her bedroom, blocked her way, and stripped off her clothes, beat her and then raped her because he was at the first time challenged to his authority.

“Don't you move!” Jim yelled at Arvey harshly. “You are my dame property, and I want you right where you are, and I want you naked. Stand right there in your tracks until I tell you that you can move.” (Hurston, 1948, p. 216)

Just as Cheng (2005) commented that “although *Seraph* is a novel about white people, it is consistent with Hurston's previous works in theme, revealing the discrimination and oppression against women and the trauma of domestic violence on women in the patriarchal society of the American South” (p. 285).

III. ESTHETIC SOURCES AS USUAL

In *Seraph*, black cultural tradition such as black music and humor penetrates not only into the plot but also the characters. Hurston expresses her resistance to the racial and cultural inequality in her special way and demonstrates the influence of black culture on the white mainstream culture.

A. *Black Music*

In the novel *Seraph*, although the black, apparently, were put behind the white, black music is performed throughout the story. The protagonists in *Seraph*, Arvey and Jim were all born and they grew up in white families in a small Florida town in the south of America, who appreciated black music consciously and unconsciously. Joe, Jim's “negro friend”, a black, performed black music, and most of all, Joe was Jim's son, Kenny's first teacher to teach him music.

Joe, the main black character in this novel, “is a figure adept at music performance” (Xiao, 2015, p. 36). In *Seraph*, Joe's first appearance is accompanied by blues that is the symbol of the blackness, which “is definitely no accident, rather, it indicates the importance of the latter (the blues) to the blacks” (Xiao, 2015, p. 36). Joe sang blues, “Hands full of nothing, mouth full of ‘much obliged’” (Hurston, 1948, p. 43), which expressed his grief and complaint in life and resistance to oppression. When Jim came, Joe switched to sing “Oh, don't you see dat rider coming?” (Hurston, 1948, p. 43), a turpentine song to describe turpentine workers' daily life. Joe is a typical black character in *Seraph*, black music such as the blues is his unique way to vent his pain and pleasure of his life as well as his resistance to inequality.

Ironically, Arvey looks down upon Negroes, but it seems that black music never leaves her life. Just as Jim and Arvey got ready for bed on the wedding night, “there was a gentle rustling outside the bedroom window, the full of tones of a guitar break out, playing in the way that only Negroes play that instrument. Clear melody, full-bodied harmony, and added bass that imitated drums” (Hurston, 1948, p. 58). Arvey was gradually attracted by “instrumental pieces, blues sung by men and some by women; spirituals, not sad and forlorn, but sung with a drummy rhythm to them, works songs and ballads” (Hurston, 1948, p. 59). “The music outside did something strange and new to Arvey. The strains induced pictures before her eyes. They conjured up odors and tastes. Streams of colors played across the sky for her, and she tasted exotic fruits.” (Hurston, 1948, p. 59) Arvey, as a typical “white cracker”, who despised black owing to racial prejudice, appreciated the black music at the moment. “The concert came to as end on an old ballad that Arvey had heard often, but never really learned...Arvey resolved that she would learn that song the very next day...The ballad went on for many more verses, and even moved to tears.” (Hurston, 1948, p. 59) The very imitate scene of black music aroused Arvey's emotion, “sweet and bitter mixed up in just the night amount” (Hurston, 1948, p. 59). She was all but moved to tears and said “that was just too sweet and too wonderful, Jim. Don't expect to ever forget this night, the longest day I live” (Hurston, 1948, p. 59).

Arvey never considers that one day her son would make a living by playing black music because it cannot be accepted by the white. Her son, Kenny, was interested in performance, such as chanting and dancing. At the same time, he was more or less affected by Joe, from who Kenny learnt jazz and blues in his childhood. Kenny asked to go to Joe's house to practice the box from time to time. When Kenny claimed that he was going to make a living with box, Arvey expressed her complete disagreement. She stated that it was the black who picked boxes, that it was impossible to make a living by doing that: “... I got my first time to see any of 'em make a living at it (picking boxes)” (Hurston, 1948, p. 202). She emphasized that “It's all right to humor Kenny to an extent, but who you reckon is going to pay good money

to hear anybody pick a box?" (Hurston, 1948, p. 202).

Kenny joined in a big band and was invited to perform in New Orleans where white musicians were taking over black music as they could make more money at it. Significantly, Joe, who taught Kenny black music when he was a child, produced a great influence on Kenny and he contributed much to white musicians around Kenny to make a living at playing black music although Joe, himself, made nothing in black music but raised his family by working for Jim. Gradually, black music became popular with the white as well as white singers and musicians. Even Kenny claimed "it is just a matter of time when white artists will take it (black music) all over. Getting to it's not considered just darky music and dancing nowadays. It's American, and belongs to everybody." (Hurston, 1948, p. 202) While Kenny was performing, Arvay begged Jim to leave. Jim said that "...I want to watch and see...You could almost think those were colored folks playing that music" (Hurston, 1948, p. 212). Much more ironically, Kenny was growing to be a rising star in the music scene.

As a precious heritage of African American culture, black music has gradually become an inseparable part of the whole American culture in the process of collision with the white mainstream culture. In the novel, black music is a symbol of black cultural vitality, breaking down the barriers between different races and demonstrating its great influence on the white and their life. Du Bois (1989) stated, "black music, a unique category American music, is reserved as an extraordinary spiritual legacy and the greatest wealth of the black nation" (p.181) and more importantly, black music is a pride of the whole America as well.

B. Humor

Humor refers to a unique comedic effect that the aesthetic subject grasps the funny and ridiculous things with the witty and meaningful wisdom as the main aesthetic way. It is a light and subtle smile full of human wisdom. Importantly, humor is one of the typical characteristics of African-American literature. Hurston, as a great humorist, throughout her career, worked tirelessly to explore the role of humor that plays in life, celebrating black culture with humorous jokes, whether in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* or in *Moses, Man of the Mountains*. Without exception of the novel *Seraph*, Hurston makes full use of her humor talent to draw a picture of humor for readers, who employs black humor in terms of humorous language, humorous scenes and humorous characters among both white and black people. Humor art runs through the novel throughout, which "has influenced mainstream America's popular culture more profoundly than anything else in black culture except music" (Levine, 1994, p. 4).

For instance, Arvay's father, Brock, in order to test the intention of whether Jim wants to marry his daughter, tells a story about marriage customs to Jim.

...Jim, it's just the habit they got back there in them Arkansaw mountains. When a fellow sees a girl he figgers he'd love to marry, he goes to her Paw and asks for her. So the girl's Paw, if the fellow is agreeable to him, calls the girl to him, and they stand her up in a barrel. If her head sticks out, they figger that she's old enough to git married, and he turns her over to her new husband. (Hurston, 1948, p. 38-39)

Jim, knowing that the story was made up, chuckled and then asked, "but how about it if she ain't tall enough for the head to stick out the barrel? Do the fellow have to wait till she grows some more?" (Hurston, 1948, p. 39). Brock could read Jim's curiosity to the answer to the question expresses his interest and his sincerity in marrying his daughter Arvay. Naturally, Brock showed his attitude. He laughed: "If her head don't stick out, they saws the barrel off some" (Hurston, 1948, p. 39). A funny story as well as the quite humorous response made both Jim and Brock burst out laughing because they understood what meant each other.

When Angeline, Jim's beloved daughter, was falling in love with Hatton, a young Yankee, he considered that it was very necessary to sound out whether Hatton was a responsible and promising man. Jim laughed and said, "You Yankees can really find a dollar" (Hurston, 1948, p.182). Hatton, was as humorous as Jim was, responded to him very confidently: "You know what they say about us Damnyankees down here. Come down with a dirty shirt and five dollars and never change either one and still manage to end up rich" (Hurston, 1948, p.182). Jim tries to get more details about Hatton, his future son-in-law by asking whether he would come down with a dirty shirt and five dollars while Hatton didn't provide anything specific. Jim and Hatton continued their conversation in a ridiculous and humorous way. Hatton "gave a mysterious smile" (Hurston, 1948, p. 182). "When and if I marry, I want it so that my wife can toss a ten dollar bill in the penny collection in church, and if the usher looks surprised at her and frowns, take her finger and beckon him back and fling in a hundred and tell him to go with that..."(Hurston, 1948, p. 182)

Joe, Jim's Negro friend, experienced one misfortune after another. He opened up a grocery store to sell things when he shut down the still and imagined he would become "more of a businessman than anything else". Unluckily, he failed again. Jim teased him, "it (the grocery store) didn't last you very long" (Hurston, 1948, p. 247). Joe scoffed himself "That sure is the evermore truth, you'se telling...and my big family eating out of the store, I used that placed up in no time at all" (Hurston, 1948, p. 247-248). As a result, a white man "offered to trade" the store with some hogs. A good sense of humor displays Joe's tenacity and optimism. Joe claimed, "So then I was out of the store business and into the hog business, and figgered that I had done beat outa some fine hogs, and could make me independent living out of raising hogs" (Hurston, 1948, p. 248). When it comes to hogs, Joe said, "Them hogs must have been crossed with hound-dog or gator once. Man, they could eat...but look like they never put on no meat" (Hurston, 1948, p. 248). Obviously, Joe did not gain anything in raising hogs so that he traded a dozen hogs for a dozen chickens. Just as Joe deprecated himself, "I must be born for bad luck." It turned out to be another failure because the chickens did not lay

eggs. For Joe, he dreamt of making money to support his family through what he did. However, he suffered one failure after another, whose business experience was so funny that Jim “laughed and laughed” and “Arvay asked eagerly” to know more about him. Joe, not a fool, was “aware of the harshness under the surface gloss of reality” and expressed his “rich emotions in colloquial language, reflecting the contradictions in life” (Su, 2013, p.136).

In *Seraph*, humor is revealed not only by the black but the white, that is, under Hurston’s pen, humor, a culture core of black people, is expanded to be used among white people. Humor is the core part of the special psychological mechanism and cultural tradition formed in the life of the black people in the American continent for hundreds of years. Hurston’s humor, for black people, reflects the survival strategy, survival state of the African American nation and its resistance strategy to the external environment and internal factors that restrict the destiny of the nation. At the same time, humor is also a link between Heston’s fighting spirit and humanity in his pursuit of democratic freedom ideal, which is not only his strategic choice to convey the democratic ideal, but also an important channel for him to express the faith of human nature.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the above analysis, it can be found that “there are many striking similarities between *Seraph on the Suwanee* and *Their Eyes Were Watching*” (Meisenhelder, 1999, p. 92). Exactly, “Hurston’s final novel (*Seraph*) develops in a more complex way the themes that have already been raised in her earlier works” (Cronin, 1998, p. 22). Hurston does not deviate from but reiterates the themes in terms of resistance to oppression and discrimination, the affirmation of self-discovery and fulfilment in novel writing as she had always done. Besides, Hurston, though she didn’t say what she really means directly, tended to produce a special strategy by highlighting the white, who were put in the foreground throughout the novel while the black the background, to perform the black culture traditions and the influence of the black cultural tradition on the white mainstream culture, to strive for the possible equality of culture and race. Objectively, Hurston never forgets the infiltration of African American culture, aiming to enhance their national self-confidence and the sense of belonging of marginalized African Americans, to construct a hopeful spiritual home for helpless African Americans. “Her career is characterized by resistance to oppression, affirmation of self-discovery and fulfilment, and celebration of her cultural origins.” (Clair, 1989, p. 39-40)

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