

"CULLUD DANCING" INTO THE WESTERN LITERARY CANON:

THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD AS THE
AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMALE TRANSLATION
OF JOHN MILTON'S *PARADISE LOST*

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Dedicated to the New Eve

In a segregated Florida graveyard lies a woman of whom Robert Hemenway cites a New York daily publication describing her as the writer of the most "vital and original novel about the American Negro that has yet been written by a member of the Negro race" (6). Critics consider her most well-known novel *Their Eyes Are Watching God* "one of the most revealing treatments in modern literature of a woman's quest for a satisfying life" (6). Robert Hemenway sounds out the etched words on her granite marker, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Genius of the South," (*Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* 1). Harold Bloom documents she is the "precursor" for Alice Walker, the Pulitzer-Prize winning author and "spokesperson for African-American feminism" (*Bloom's Biocritiques: Alice Walker* 1).

Walker in turn contends that if faced with a life sentence on a deserted island with only ten books, she would include Hurston's acclaimed masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*...for to Walker, "*There is no book more important to me than this one*" (ZNHLB xiii).

The New York Times' Ralph Blumenthal pursues the question why there is so much acclaim for a writer who was buried in an unmarked grave at a time when no publishing company would print any of her books ("Party for Zora Neale Hurston, Obscure No More" par. 5). At a time in American history characterized by Langston Hughes as the period when "The Negro was in vogue," (par. 9) Hurston asserted she was not "one of the sobbing school of Negrohood" (par. 13). After a difficult career forging her own identity as an African American female writer, she contemplated suicide in wake of 1948 false accusations by her neighbor of having sexual relations with her 10-year-old son (though she was in Honduras at the time of the supposed event). "My race has seen fit to destroy me," Hurston wrote against the backdrop of a black newspaper exaggerating the story (par. 14). She died at the age of 69. No publisher would approach her final nonfiction work, "Herod the Great."

Yet in August 2002, two thousand international fans flocked to a Central Park stage for a reading of her works, following the growing swell of 29 books and hundreds of literary articles about her, triggered by Alice Walker's 1973 discovery of her grave (par. 5). Walker proposes amid the growing popularity of Hurston's work that her most distinctive quality is her "racial health—a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings" (ZNHLB xii). Walker likens Hurston more to an "uncolonized African" than the African Americans of her early 1900s era; she radiated a self-confidence in herself and in black people that set her apart even from other Harlem Renaissance contemporaries, partly because she grew up in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, where her father helped author the laws. "This community affirmed her right to exist and loved her as an extension of itself"

(xiii) where she would experience the word-soaked cascade of Post-Reconstruction black oral tradition on Joe Clark's general store porch, where "black people became black" (12-13).

Yet does Hurston's grave in the Fort Pierce, Florida, overgrown and seemingly forgotten, speak in somber whispers of only "a native American genius" (ZNHLB xiv)? As American readers gaze back into history, the question arises of what else can we make of Walker's claim that "With her easy laughter and her southern drawl, her belief in doing cullud dancing *authentically*, Hurston seemed—among these genteel 'New Negroes' of the Harlem Renaissance—black" (xv)? We can begin to perceive that Hurston is more than her traditional categorization as a black writer, more than a feminist writer, is perceived as American, more than 'black,' and more than a deeply criticized literary pioneer. We might begin to see that Hurston is misunderstood even by her deepest supporters, including Walker and other prominent feminist writers of the late 1900s. We see that she stands not just as the spokeswoman for some amorphous authentic 'black culture' but as the bridge between the classical Western literary tradition and 20th century black American culture, a boisterous and unconventional synthesizer of English Enlightenment and black American folklore, a powerful shaper of America's current literary community. Walker may have unknowingly detected the strand of Western mythical storytelling tendency and 'enlightened ideals' amid Hurston's writings when Walker stated in her Foreword that her black friends, on reading Hurston's *Mules and Men*, testified that "a kind of paradise was regained" (xii). At the heart of this rediscovery lies the truth that black Americans in Post-Reconstruction United States stand not outside of the Western literary tradition documenting the development of Western civilization—they stand firmly within it.

To accomplish the reclaiming of this truth, Zora Neale Hurston seized her readers with a flare of her elusive spirit and creative pen, turning black oral folklore

into written word as the ancient Greeks transcribed such western literary classics as Virgil's *Ovid* and Homer's *Odyssey*. In the dawning frontier of Post-Reconstruction black identity, Hurston serves as American Prometheus who steals the spotlight of the literary community's attention and directs it to the pulsating African American community initially dwelling in the darkness of racially-driven neglect, simultaneously illustrating to this community the value and richness of their folklore tradition. A closer analysis of Hurston's education and early writing career reveals abounding evidence of her contact with the Mt. Olympus of the Western literary canon, carefully selected and inhabited by such mythical figures as the Virgil, William Shakespeare, and John Milton. Over two centuries before her, John Milton's writing career offers striking parallels to Hurston as he created his humanist epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, uniting the literary Greek classics with Christian allusions to produce a work orientated toward hopes for national unity in the wake of the bloody and divisive English Civil War (1642-1651). I argue that Hurston follows Milton's model, drawing from her Howard University education and early literary career, to incorporate Greek mythology, a Christian upbringing with her preacher-father, and her personal desire for African Americans' unity through their celebrated identity in Post-Civil War America (1861-1865), which cries and sweats and dances amid the pages of *Their Eyes Were Watching GOD*.

Hurston spent her childhood years with her Baptist preacher father, John Hurston, whose influence appears throughout her writings, including *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), which is a black folklore retelling of the story of Moses, and *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934). She wrote this earlier novel as her autobiographical account concerning her preaching father and family, alluding to biblical imagery of the Jewish prophet to the Ninevites (ZNHLB 6). This lasting influence complemented the philosophical impact of her five-year study at Howard University, particularly with the classically-trained professor Alain Locke, the Father of the

Harlem Renaissance and chair of Howard's philosophy department. This prolific professor served as the first African American Rhodes Scholar, attending Herford College within Oxford University from 1907 to 1910. Leonard Harris and Charles Molesworth note Locke's familiarity with the Greek classics as he carried over his Harvard University strength in Greek to begin reading the classics (*Alain L. Locke: Biography of a Philosopher* 63). Having met Tennyson's niece named Ms. Weld, Locke immersed himself in the Oxford academic world still resounding with the voice of Milton and the English literary giants over two centuries previous (63).³

Rosanna Cox in *Renaissance Studies* outlines Milton's similar response in the wake of the English Civil War which left a broken, bloody country struggling to form a unified body. Cox notes that Milton served eleven years as the Secretary of Foreign Tongues, "fashioning...an international identity through propaganda and polemic" ("The mountains are in labour, only mice are born': Milton and Republican Diplomacy" 423). He translated diplomatic correspondence on behalf of the Council of State, formed for the "entertaining, keeping, renewing, or settling of amity and a good correspondancy with foreign kingdoms and states," as per its 1649 charter ("Act appointing a Council of State," *The Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution* 381-3).

Alain Locke completed his English studies and returned to an early 20th century United States, marred by two surges of African American lynchings that Steward E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck note as resulting in the deaths of an estimated 1,900 black citizens ("Toward a Threat Model of Southern Black Lynchings" *Social Threat and Social Control* 33). As American society adjusted to the post-Civil War

³ Locke expressed his familiarity with the Western literary canon during his 1910 London *Daily Mail* article quoting Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the monumental German writer of *Faust*, that if nations cannot understand each other as nations then "they must learn to tolerate each other as individuals" (Donald Markwell "September speech for 2010 United States, Bermuda, and Caribbean Rhodes Scholars").

Emancipation of African Americans, southern white residents sought social controls over these “potential competitors” with such methods including Jim Crow legislation and lynchings. The white ‘vigilante’ mobs viewed lynching as “an instrument of social control over a ‘threatening’ southern black population” (34). Locke’s responded to these waves of racial violence and distrust by seeking to create a new myth to counter that of the threatening Negro. He echoed John Milton’s philosophical and political model through his careful art of propaganda during the critical period to fashion the New Negro. Two and a half centuries after Milton traveled London’s alleys, the young Locke walked the streets of Washington D.C...building, keeping, and renewing bridges between American white culture and the New Negro nation he worked to constructed. The volumes of writing pieces and art from his protégées, including Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, stretched the chasm between white-dominated American society and the diverse African American community.

Locke joined the faculty at Howard University and soon invited Hurston, who was studying there, to join the selective campus literary club that he formed, *The Stylus*. Within the group, Hurston published her first story in May 1921, “John Redding Goes to Sea,” illustrating two distinctive traits which would run throughout her later works. The first characteristic is her black Baptist Christian upbringing which expressed itself in this short story as John Redding, in an Eatonville-like village, appears like a Jesus Christ-like figure: “His arms were outstretched and the water washed over his brograns...A heavy piece of steel or timber had struck him in falling, for his left side was laid open by the thrust” (Hurston 939). The second is her decision to use Eatonville as the contextual basis for many of her pieces, which included an anthropological dimension strongly influenced by Locke’s personal friend and anthropology student of Franz Boas, Melville Herskovits. Sidney W. Mintz in his introduction to Melville Herskovits’ *The Myth of the Negro Past*, notes that Herskovits’ 1926 research plan prioritized a “search for survivals of African cultures

among contemporary Afro-Americans” (xiv). This emphasis expresses itself in the writings of Hurston, who served as Herskovits’ research assistant, which consistently draw specifically from her own such example where African culture survived, her all-black childhood town of Eatonville, Florida.

Locke strongly influenced Hurston’s early career as he guided her writing and its trajectory, along with other Harlem Renaissance writers. He systematically labored to promote Hurston and other Harlem writers because he believed their growing “cultural recognition” would “prove the key to that revaluation of the Negro,” necessary for the improvement of race relations (ZNHLB 40). W.E.B. Du Bois critiques Locke’s literary promotion, particularly his 1925 anthology of *The New Negro*, in light of his larger social agenda: “this book is filled and bursting with propaganda, but it is a propaganda for the most part beautifully and painstakingly done” (ZNHLB 42).

Locke approached propaganda similar to how John Milton incorporated it through his post as the Secretary of Foreign Tongues, helping communicate with foreign nations on behalf of the masses of English people. Amid their division in the aftermath of the English Civil War, they struggled to articulate the shared prototypical concept of the Englishman representing them. Locke heeded this Miltonic model, stating in his introduction to *The New Negro* anthology that “no sane observer...would contend that the great masses are articulate as yet” (TNN 7). Since he contends that African Americans cannot voice their identity and situation, the “new intellectuals”(TNN 7)—including Hurston, Langston Hughes, and other artists—must speak for the masses so the “voice of the New Negro is heard” (“Negro Youth Speaks” 47). However, Hemenway asserts that Hurston grew to oppose Locke’s propagandist drive as a threat to her art, eventually working with Hughes and Wallace Thurman to create the 1926 magazine, *Fire!!*, “devoted to the younger Negro artists” and committed to the inarticulate masses without propaganda underpinnings (ZNHLB 43).

Hurston's later writing, particularly *Their Eyes Were Watching GOD*, serves as substantial evidence how her post-Locke writings responded to Locke's classically influenced propaganda, which still significantly affected Hurston's philosophical writing approach. In her popularized novel, Hurston celebrates the inarticulate masses—rather than speaking for them as one of the “new intellectuals,” she lends them her written voice so they may speak for themselves. Hurston continues Locke's Miltonic model of developing a national identity as she creates the absolutist world of Eatonville in which African Americans were co-creators and definers of their world, and in turn, their own identities as residents. Similar to Hurston's absolutist world, Milton sought to create and define a new world and people for his Puritan post-English Civil War society. The narrative nucleus of this new creation is Adam and Eve's complementary otherness, the harmonizing interplay of different but equal natures, which reverberates as Hurston's primary instrument of translation in the realization of the pear tree image in the context of Janie and Tea Cake's relationship. The product is *Their Eyes Were Watching GOD* with Janie and Tea Cake as the African American female re-telling of Adam and Eve in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Locke's New Negro programme served as the catalysis for Hurston to develop a counter-approach in which she exchanges his subtle Miltonic group identity formation (i.e. stimulating the development of a group of people to assume a certain identity) instead for a personal narrative of the relationship of man and woman—Janie and Tea Cake. Her novel continues the prevalent concept in Western literature of complementary otherness, running through the ancient Greek Virgil's *Ovid*, continuing through Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and culminating in Hurston's post-Harlem Renaissance America. Essential to the development of the voice of Hurston in a segregated frontier nation of America is her understanding of how man relates to woman and woman to man, in the context of a new and exciting, yet volatile world. Hurston adapted this Miltonic literary tool of complementary otherness (rather than utilize as he did to promote a common ancestry of the English people and thus their

shared national identity) to strip it of its propaganda use. She instead proposed a celebration of African American folk life and the individual black voice, her own female voice describing the relationship she desires.

This formula represents a prominent Western literary strategy—and essentially human strategy—of a storytelling heritage for humanity which situates a relational narrative in the center of the story. Hurston adopts this narrative as she gives written word to the oral tradition of Post-Reconstruction southern blacks, similar to how Ovid and other ancient Greeks produced written epics to chronicle and disseminate oral legends. She is thus adopted into the revered home of the Western literary canon as she builds a mythic and folk narrative using classic influences to provide an account of unifying black identity, as Milton who labored toward unifying English identity through an account of a shared ancestry of Adam and Eve.

Hurston opens her novel by directing the readers' eyes upward to the same tree that Western writers focused so many of their stories and storytelling around—the Eden Paradise, holding within itself the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In her own retelling of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, she describes how Janie the protagonist, “saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches” (*Their Eyes Were Watching GOD* 181). Janie as Hurston's autobiographic character recognizes her hopes and dreams and sexual nature which she likens to a pear tree. Under its branches, she continually rested, contemplating the pear tree's bloom which called her to “gaze on a mystery” (*TEWWG* 183). There is something within herself—about herself—that Janie realizes eludes quantification or verifiable proof—she is an alluring mystery unto herself. The Prometheus Hurston brings the light of the reader's attention to see how Americans, black and white, alike share the same legendary tree, similar desires and passions, and scandalous triumphs and tragedies. Milton echoes the

theme of his readers' unity, bound to their common humanity, opening *Paradise Lost* as a tale:

Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
Sing, heavenly Muse. (Book I 1-5)

Hurston's narrative in early 1900s Florida provides a different version of John Milton's 1600s' re-telling of the Judeo-Christian story of Adam and Eve. Where Milton describes the fruit of "that forbidden tree," Hurston creates her own account of the pear tree of her heart of hearts that she forbids to all, except her Adam, Tea Cake. From the very onset of her piece before the pear tree, Hurston articulates her conception of the men and women's differing natures. Some men spend their lives watching their wishes "sail forever on the horizon...until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation," yet women actively shape their wishes and memories, forgetting "all those things they don't want to remember...Then they act and do things accordingly" (*TEWWG* 175). Hurston's situates her narrative using the Miltonic technique of highlighting the differing natures of man and woman, and how the interaction of their fundamental natures births drama. For this drama, Milton portrays "In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth/ Rose out of Chaos" (Book I 9-10), yet Hurston instead begins her drama by how in "the beginning of this was a woman" (*TEWWG* 175). This narrative refuses to be constrained to the categorization of simply an African American woman's romance story—Hurston's narrative surges over labels and early 1900s' expectations of black female writers. Her account proclaims its position squarely in the Western literary tradition using mythical and biblical imagery, sweetly whispers in Hurston's world with "kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world" (*TEWWG* 183).

Their Eyes Were Watching GOD offers a poignant picture of the translated version of Milton's classically-influenced Eve, cognizant of her own mystery that faintly whispers of a complementary other: "She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with impatience. Waiting for the world to be made" (183-184). Janie in the novel's genesis longs and waits for what she soon realizes is the blossoming of the pear tree, and her own identity. Through this blossoming, Hurston expresses her break with Locke and other upper-class black Americans as she forges her own voice in her own literary world, celebrating the polished—and unpolished—aspects of black folk life. Deborah G. Plant asserts that Hurston sides with the uneducated black American, voicing her unique writing approach through her autobiographical voice in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* as she "joins forces with the 'humble Negro' in the verbal warfare directed against the elite" (*Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom: the Philosophy and Politics of Zora Neale Hurston* 21). Though Hurston distances herself from Locke and other Harlem Renaissance writers who filtered black experience to publish only the traits considered proper for the New Negro, she retains Locke's emphasis on the importance of racial identity along with his example of heeding Milton's model of Greek mythology and Christian biblical images. Hurston thus engages the question of how to respond to the Miltonic literary tradition from an approach differing from Alain Locke, a question she largely resolves through reliance on her formative years in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida.

The novel's front gate that Janie leaned on, the Eatonville she describes, the characters and events all emerge from her childhood experiences in Florida's African American township which Locke's *Stylus* group had years before encouraged her to pursue. Her writings reveal several important motifs which simultaneously shape her stories and serve as expressions of the early family life which shaped her. Her family's move to Eatonville, Florida, in the late 1800s shaped her storytelling in

profound ways; she grew up in what has since been recognized as the country's first incorporated African American township. Black inferiority was absent from her cultural formation. Valerie Boyd in *Wrapped in Rainbows: the Life of Zora Neale Hurston* chronicles how these African American citizens were both pioneers and leaders, ground-breakers and rule-creators in this great experiment of Post-Reconstruction Florida that in her words, was "a city of five lakes, three croquet courts, three hundred brown skins, three hundred good swimmers, plenty guavas, two schools, and no jailhouse" (22). Memories of her pastor-father, John Hurston, and her Sunday school teacher-mother, Lucy Potts Hurston, manifest themselves with Hurston's skillful weaving of Biblical and black cultural motifs and images in her later writings such as *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. Hurston not only was familiar with the Creation narrative of Adam and Eve, but her relationship narrative of Janie and Tea Cake reflects the Creation model in her account of Eatonville in *Their Eyes Were Watching GOD*.

This narrative features a geographical background which reflects Janie and Tea Cake's internal situation as they live and work on the shores of the Lake Okeechobee. This non-industrialized frontier land serves as an African Americans migrant work camp, hanging precariously between the dominant white 1920s society and the invisible black subpopulation. This tension mirrors Milton's portrayal of Eden which Patricia Parker describes in "Eve, Evening, and the Labor of Reading" as a "pendant world," suspended between Heaven and hell before the approaching fall of humanity (cf. 319-342). In this Harlem product, the chaos figure of Satan in *Paradise Lost* translates into the American Hurricane of 1928 which wreaks havoc on Janie's fictional Florida (and biographical area), bringing death and destruction, casting her and Tea Cake out of their seemingly paradise-like dwelling and post-marital bliss. Hurston transcribes Milton's creation epic to situate Tea Cake as the willing victim of the rabid dog bite amid crying parallels to the serpent's mortal sting upon Eve. In contrast to Milton's daughters who transcribed *Paradise Lost* as their

father dictated it to them, Hurston dictates to her publishers her narrative, thus creating a written record of her own female voice for future audiences.

Hurston's female voice weaves the story of Janie and Tea Cake's pioneer mentality, distinctive for Eatonville residents. Janie and Tea Cake's set out into marital union as they together face the dawning of a new period for them on the shores of Lake Okeechobee, harkening to Adam and Eve's venture into the raw, volatile, but fertile unexplored post-fall world. For both Milton and Hurston, the central place of man and woman's relationship is at the heart of their narratives and provides the life-blood for their plot development and discussion of major themes. Hurston's piece echoes Milton's hope for fallen humanity amid a fallen world—even after an all-white court acquits Janie for Tea Cake's murder and she moves back to the accusatory environment of Eatonville, she describes her home in a self-realized resolute embrace of the hope that is hers, relying heavily on the importance of the sun as a symbol of new life. She "pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder," cognizant of Tea Cake's presence, as Adam and Eve emerged from the Garden of Eden as refugees yet guided by the Archangel Michael into a new, vibrant world of creative potential. Hurston's recollection of her mother's voice articulates the culmination of Milton and her own literary trajectory: "Jump at de sun" for even if "we might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground" (ZNHLB 14).

Hurston further parallels Milton's literary model by swirling together the drama of Janie and Tea Cake's relationship with many of the same classical Greek couples that Milton incorporated into *Paradise Lost*. In the Miltonic Adam's description of his consummation with Eve of their marriage, he states that:

Joyous the birds; fresh gales and gentle airs

Whispered it to the woods, and from their wings

Flung rose, flung odours from the spicy shrub,

Disporting, till the amorous bird of night

Sung spousal, and bid haste the evening star

On his hilltop, to light the bridal lamp (Book VIII 515-520).

Alastair Fowler notes how Milton draws on the ancient Greek signal of the rising of the planet Venus which is described as the igniting of the bridal lamp—used by the lamp bearer to lead the bride to the bridegroom (ed. Fowler, *Paradise Lost* 456).

James Gollnick cites Apuleius' most renowned story second century book, *Metamorphoses*, which documents the Greek mythical tale of Eros and Psyche and how it serves as a prominent source of this lamp imagery for a bride and her bridegroom, which Milton incorporates. In this tale, Psyche is a mortal whose beauty rivals that of Aphrodite herself. One day the wind whisks her away to a wonderful valley in which Psyche encounters a royal palace amid the woods. There, she follows the directions of a mysterious voice to clad herself in a bridal dress for the wedding banquet and then afterwards go to bed. The speaker of the voice awakens her and meets her in the dark, consummating their marriage under the cover of night. Not wishing to reveal his identity until the appropriate time, Psyche eventually uncovers a concealed lamp and realizes her husband is the god, Cupid (or the Greek Eros) (Gollnick, *Love and the Soul* 5-7).

Hurston's account of Tea Cake through Janie's eyes parallels Milton's allusion to Cupid and Psyche as Janie sees him in her mind, "Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spice hung about him. He was a glance from GOD" (*TEWWG* 261), prefiguring Milton's description of Adam and Eve's consummation when the birds "flung odours from the spicy shrub." Yet Hurston's account revises Milton's Adam and Eve narrative by switching the male-female perspective; she deposits in Janie the divinely influenced vision of Tea Cake, yet Milton assigns to

Adam the vision of Eve, of whom he sees “heaven in her eye” (Book VIII 488). Like the divine magnificence of Cupid, Hurston portrays Tea Cake through Janie’s voice as “the son of the Evening Son,” for the story is seen—and told—from her perspective as a black woman.

Milton’s explicit reference to the mythical couple of Cupid and Psyche in *Comus* (1634) further supports the claim that Hurston’s account follows Milton’s model of classic allusion to Eros and Psyche. Jeanie Grant Moore argues in the *Milton Quarterly* that the Cupid and Pysche myth is the source material from which Milton “recreates that earlier innocence in *Paradise Lost*” (“The Two Faces of Eve: Temptation Scenes in *Comus* and *Paradise Lost*” 10):

Celestial Cupid, her famed son, advanced,
Holds his dear Psyche sweet entranced,
After her wandering labours long,
Till free consent the gods among
Make her his eternal bride...” (29-33).

The prevalence of Milton’s allusions to this mythical couple gives credibility to the argument that Hurston’s narrative echoes Psyche’s struggle to survive the waters of the River Styx amid its vicious guardian dragons when she describes Janie’s battle in the hurricane flood waters at the end of the novel, only to witness a rabid dog who “lashed up his fury for the charge” and sank his teeth into Tea Cake’s cheek (*TEWWG* 310). This scene invokes the mythical scene of Cerebrus—the three-headed dog who guards souls from crossing Styx—which Milton alludes to in Book II of *Paradise Lost*’s description of hell, pierced by “A cry of hell hounds never ceasing barked/ With wide Cerberean mouths full lound, and rung/ A hideous peal” (Book II, 654-656).

Hurston concludes *Their Eyes Were Watching GOD* with an image strongly reminiscent of Hermes leading Psyche to heaven for Zeus to transform her into a divine being through a nectar cup before Zeus joins Psyche and Cupid in marriage. As Milton described Adam and Eve's consummation of their marriage amid birds singing which "bid haste the evening star/ On his hilltop, to light the bridal lamp" (Book VIII 515-520), Janie "mounted the stairs with her lamp. The light in her hand was like a spark of sun-stuff washing her face in fire" (*TEWWG* 333). She leaves behind the mortal world's accusatory glares of the townspeople and agonizing memories of losing Tea Cake to the Cerebrus-rabid-dog, only to be accused of coldly murdering him. Once in her room, the time is finally here for this black Psyche to greet the unveiled face of her immortal bridegroom: "He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking" (*TEWWG* 333). Echoing the majestic Greek gods and goddesses present for Psyche and Cupid's marriage, Janie "pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net...She called in her soul to come and see" (*TEWWG* 333). Considering that the ancient Greek translation of Psyche is *psukhe* (breath or soul), Janie emerges as an African American reconfiguration of the Greek Psyche which in the character's own respect serves an influential role in Milton's description of Adam and Eve.

Another Greek mythical couple which Milton draws on and Hurston adapts is Pygmalion and his ivory statue of a woman. Mandy Green in "The Virgin in the Garden: Milton's Ovidian Eve" highlights the link between the creation of Eve from Adam's rib and the fleshy woman created from Pygmalion's ivory statue, become submissive and alluring: "Without a name and without a voice, the former statue may seem as much Pygmalion's possession as the piece of ivory from which she was originally fashioned" (Green 906). Like Pygmalion's ivory-like-Eve in *Paradise Lost*, Hurston's Janie is more of Joe Starks' possession before meeting Tea Cake: "The wife of the Mayor was not just another woman...she couldn't get but so close to most of them in spirit"—she is known to the townspeople not as Janie the person,

but as Mrs. Mayor Starks the possession (*TEWWG* 211, 208). Joe erects her as his possession in the town center as he did the street lamp, leaving her able only in spirit to have flickering connection with the other residents. When the townspeople celebrate the creation of the town, Tony Taylor's loud call for Janie to make speech after Joe is cut short by the new Mayor Starks' flat declaration, "mah wife don't know nothin' bout no speech-makin' (208) because to Joe, Janie does not have a personal voice. The Greek allusion in Milton and later as a translated version in Hurston portrays an owner-object relationship between Adam and Eve, in addition to Joe and Janie.

This disjunction between man and woman in Hurston's account ends with a checkerboard. A "tall man" who "looked familiar" appeared at Janie's store after Joe's death, and seeing all the other Eatonville residents gone to the ball game, he invites her to checkers. This mysterious man draws her into checkers, celebrating her presence and her decision on the board in a way that Joe --seeing her to be more useful as his store employee—ignored. The fertile male figure who reveals himself as "Vergible Woods...Tea Cake for short" (253) contrasts the sterile typology invoked by Janie's first husband named Logan Killocks, whose lonely house "was a lonesome place like a stump in the middle of the woods" (191). As Tea Cake walks Janie home that evening, she has a passing anxiety for her safety with this strange man in the dark, only to reflect "Tea Cake wasn't strange. Seemed as if she had known him all her life" (255). Janie intuitively recognizes something familiar with this man that leaves her at peace.

Hurston's portrayal of Janie and Tea Cake's first encounter reverberates with the typology of Milton's Adam and Eve in Book IV of *Paradise Lost*. A faceless voice guides Eve from her slumber beside the watery pool to Adam, and on seeing him, professes, "Part of my soul I seek thee, and thee claim/ My other half: with that thy gentle hand/ Seized mine" (487-489). Milton expresses the concept of complementarity of man and woman in a way that celebrates their different natures

which in turn occasions their union. Yet rather than simply mimicking Milton's popular English conception of male natural superiority in how Eve's "beauty is excelled by manly grace" (490), Hurston describes the modified concept of integral complementarity which celebrates Janie and Tea Cake's different natures while maintaining their equality, and their identity as complete selves, rather than as parts of each other.⁴ Invoking the primordial Paradise, Janie tells her concerned friend Phoeby that Tea Cake "done taught me de maiden language all over," and this language is one of equals—even during difficult periods of their relationship—in which Janie is confident enough in her equal identity that she justly him repeatedly when she suspected him of unfaithfulness, rather than remaining silent as a Pygmalion statue-turned silent woman.

Hurston's account using integral complementarity follows Milton's concept of unity of similar, differing parts emphasized in Book XII. Maggie Kilgour asserts that the impending fall of Adam and Eve—similar because they are both persons made in God's image, though different as man and woman—occasions the entrance of the unifying character of Jesus who "conglob'd/ Like things to like" (*PL*, 12. 382) and "who also as Abdiel tells Satan, brings the angels closer to God, and whose incarnation 'God with man unites' (*PL*, 12. 382)" ("Satan and the Wrath of Juno" 661). Central for Milton is the concept of necessary parts and their union (i.e. Adam and Eve), which he also expresses in *Aeropagitica* that: "It was from out of the rinde of one apple tasted that the knowledge of good and evill as two twins cleaving together leapt forth into the World. And perhaps this is that doom which *Adam* fell into of knowing good and evill, that is to say of knowing good by evill" (728). Milton's utilizes this motif of the "twins cleaving together" in *Paradise Lost* to define Adam and Eve as man and woman only within the context of their dialogue—Adam

⁴ For more on the Edith Stein's discussion of the metaphysical account of man and woman, see Prudence Allen's *Edith Stein: Woman, Second Edition Revised*.

comes to know himself through Eve and Eve through Adam (cf. Book IV 411-486). Milton's portrayal of Adam and Eve's relationship as the unification of two complementary, equal, and necessary parts reflects his own cultural history in which he joined the popular British push toward unification of divisive sectors after the English Civil War.

Hurston incorporates Milton's narrative approach of the necessary parts to form the whole through her pear tree metaphor. As Janie sits alone in her home after her fish meal with Tea Cake, thoughts of him flow as wave upon wave in her mind: "He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring" (*TEWWG* 261). Her childhood memories of the pear tree near her grandmother's home floods back into her mind, carrying with them her yearnings to "be a pear tree—any tree in bloom!" (183). As a girl seeking confirmation of her longings to receive the bee as a pear tree blossom, intrinsically tied to her identity as a woman,⁵ Janie searched for an answer but found a "personal answer for all other creations except herself" (183). As a middle-aged woman, she finds that personal answer for herself in the person of Tea Cake, through whom she comes to know her identity as a black woman with dreams of a relationship in which she is loved as an equal.

As her third marriage, Janie reflects Hurston who was herself married three times. Hurston also experienced the untamed mystery of the blooming of her own identity and literary voice, delivered in a remarkable written transcription of black oral folklore using mythical and Christian allusions as her literary predecessor and the Western giant, John Milton, before her. Amid her critics who decried her for avoiding the "race problem" by celebrating supposedly menial black life, she broke from Alain Locke to produce a fusion between autobiography and anthropology that is quickly becoming accepted into the Western literary canon as an invaluable embodiment of emerging black American female voice. Hurston declares through

⁵ Cf. Edith Stein.

her celebrated use of unpolished Post-Reconstruction black language that African Americans share in the same dramas chronicled by their European counterparts in the Western literary canon. But rather than simply reiterating Milton's account of Adam and Eve in the splendid divine light of their Heavenly Father, she encourages African Americans to look inward toward their own identities and through their own blackness as legitimate lenses through which to see their world. Hurston thus translates Milton's model to create a narrative in which the Western literary world quiets itself to gaze on as Hurston's Janie and Tea Cake stand before the approaching hurricane, "staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching GOD."

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