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The quest for identity in Frances W. Harper's Iola Leroy, Nella Larsen's quicksand and Zora Neale Hurston's their eyes were watching god.

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ABSTRACT

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THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN FRANCES E. W. HARPER’S IOLA LEROY,
NELLA LARSEN’S QUICKSAND, AND ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S
THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

Committee Chair: Dr. Susan Wright
Dissertation dated December 2011

The literary works in this study: Frances E. W. Harper’s Iola Leroy, Nella Larsen’s Quicksand, and Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God provide examples of female protagonists facing identity crises and reaching milestones in their lives as a result of their journeys towards self-actualization. The protagonists’ lives (childhood, adolescence, and adulthood/womanhood/motherhood) are traced during times of slavery, the antebellum period, the post-bellum period, and the Harlem Renaissance. Their experiences in each stage of life in relation to societal norms present the identity crisis present in each novel.

In an attempt to define feminine identity as portrayed by the protagonists in the novels, I examined past ideals of femininity in American and African American history and literature. Additionally, a definition of femininity based upon the early works is
contrasted with a definition of identity in the later works of African American female authors. Based upon the two perspectives of how the female characters discovered their identities, the female characters of later novels prove to be direct descendents of early female characters in African American literature.

As the study demonstrates, the characteristics of African American female protagonists’ of strength, resilience, confidence, and, eventually, independence are progressive in these novels which results in characters that develop positively over a period of more than seventy years. The study also suggests that the portrayal of female protagonists in the novels of African-American women continues to be patterned after the early novelists and, at the same time, continues to progress in strength and development.
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A DISSERTATION
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BY
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The literary cannon of African American literature encompasses a variety of perspectives that have mirrored the lives of African Americans throughout history. In the last century, novels surrounding the African American female have risen at rapid rates. Though the cause of the increase of writings by African American women and interest of readers in writings of African American females is not the reason for this study, there is a correlation between the writings by and about African American females over the last century that deserves or merits close examination and consideration of theme and subject matter. Many of the noted novelists of the late 1800s through the late 1900s used the subject of female identity in their works. Thus, in an attempt to define feminine identity in the novels of African American female writers, it is useful to examine past ideals of femininity in literary works. Writers today must examine the works of early African American female writers who were instrumental in shaping and defining womanhood in the works of African American female authors in later years. An examination of female characters in fiction and works written in the 1800s is critical to understanding the female characters of the early 1900s and beyond. Quite notably, the literary history of the African American female protagonist is a complex one; yet, it perhaps holds the key to defining feminine identity in novels by and about black women. Thus, the premise set forth in this literary study rests in the notion that the African American protagonists
lacked self-confidence in the early novels of Black women writers (late-nineteenth century through the twentieth century); yet, they are the prototypes for the African American protagonists of modern fiction by black novelists.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study of African American authors and female protagonists is to examine the progression of black women's identity in the characters of novels written prior to the Harlem Renaissance to those portrayed in the literature of post-Harlem Renaissance, and how these early authors have positively influenced the genre of African American literature. Before analyzing the works of Frances E. W. Harper, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston, the historical significance of women in literary history is essential for an understanding of the evolution of women's attitudes as portrayed in the writings of the authors selected for this study. In particular, an examination of female characters and African American authors prior to 1920 (Reconstruction) and after 1920 (Harlem Renaissance and beyond) will help to frame the issue of identity explored by these works.

Historical Perspective

To help frame the significance of this study, a historical look at African American women in America is needed. The question of womanhood was raised during the days of slavery and immediately after. Sojourner Truth, former slave turned abolitionist and advocate of women's rights, told of her slave experience in *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave* (1850), and delivered the infamous speech “Ain’t I a Woman?”
This historical speech allowed Sojourner Truth to share her testimony of her experience as a slave, but she also raises an important question concerning women’s rights. Her rhetorical “Ain’t I a Woman?” clearly questions the issue of woman’s worth in the world. After enumerating her duties of plowing, planting, eating, “bearing the lash” and thirteen children, Sojourner demands to know why she is not considered a woman. In essence, if a black woman was able to perform a man’s work, manage the household, and survive the shackles of slavery, then she should be classified as a woman. In a more general sense, the speech seemingly includes a description of the numerous black women who were considered to have no value during the days of slavery, and it clarifies the reasons that these black women were worth more than society attributed to them.

Sojourner Truth’s “truth” can be considered of significant importance to history in light of the events and treatment of blacks and women in the 1800s. One woman’s experience, in a sense, unknowingly affirmed black women’s worth when no one else had even cared to recognize black women as human. In addition to declaring women as valuable persons, Sojourner Truth also preached on behalf of women’s rights. Speaking in front of mixed audiences throughout the Northern states, Sojourner Truth encouraged women and pleaded with white male audiences regarding women’s right to vote and their rights to question strict divorce laws. Finally, but most importantly, her womanist views, evident in all of her works, but particularly in her speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?” challenged the traditional norms of womanhood and opened the door for women’s advocacy.

Set in this historical background, the early novels of the eighteenth century, written by African American male and female authors, struggled to portray the major
character as someone other than a slave. Often disenfranchised and unable to establish roots in any particular place including home, the former slave character struggled to find work and support his/her family. Once the shackles of slavery were removed from the female character, African American female authors found the issue of womanhood and femininity even more compelling than writing about the issue of black men. This is because of the established norms about the roles of women during slavery and long after abolition. These roles designated for women included taking care of the home, the community, and society at large as cooks, maids, wives, mothers, mentors, teachers, and nannies. Black women characters were often described by white masters and white authors as “hot constitutioned ladies” with a “lascivious temper[s]” (Giddings 35). These negative stereotypes deemed the black female less than a whole being who had little to no identity other than the labels assigned by white majority culture. They were often treated as children by employers and forced to work like mules. This is evidenced in Zora Neale Hurston’s reference to black women as the “mule[s] of the world” in her novel, Their Eyes Were Watching God. Her metaphor describes the female condition of the nineteenth-century woman as the “work animals of society” who can have “no true self-consciousness, no hope for autonomy or community” (Giddings 35).

Black female characters were mere objects in the early works. According to bell hooks, in Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black, black female subjects must be separated from objects. Hooks asserts that as subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identity, and name their history. As objects, the female’s reality is defined by others, their identity is created by others, and their history
named only in ways that define their relationship to those who are subjects (42). In contrast, the white counterparts of African American female characters have been hailed as beauty queens, mothers, and quintessential “Southern Belles.” Thus the relationships and roles of white female characters in literature were more positive and nurturing than those of black characters.

Considering black women’s history in America and images of the black woman in literature, black women writers in the 1920s shifted the focus of their protagonists from the insecure, subservient female to an appreciation of their strengths and their feminine attributes as well. The question of color deepened as brown-skinned and darker-skinned women became just as popular as light-skinned women in literature. Jessie Fauset, novelist, poet, and essayist, called for blacks to develop “[our] own beautiful and praiseworthy selves… [who are] content with [our] own types” (Giddings 190). According to Fauset, this discovery of beauty and self-worth would promote racial pride not only among black women, but among the races as a whole. The theme of self-identity seems to be constantly echoed in the literature of female writers. However, the real challenge for black female writers became how to portray black women characters in their novels. African American female writers had to decide if they should celebrate the uniqueness of black female characters in their literary works which differed from white characters or if they should continue to portray characters who assimilated with the Eurocentric standards (i.e., beauty, refinement, motherhood).

The answer to the above question lies in the time the novel was written, as well as the place, and situation of women. For years, black women have had the role of a
“shifting . . . [sort of] subterfuge that has long been practiced to ensure their survival in our society” (Jones and Gooden 6). Historically, the role of black women in the United States was to “serve and satisfy others, and hide their true selves to placate white colleagues, black men, and others in the community at large” (6). The roles of black women in literature were no different, especially in the early writings of African American authors.

Several female novelists raised the issue of identity for black women and that of the African race throughout their literary works; however, the works of Frances E. W. Harper, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston will be analyzed for the purposes of this study. The writings of these novelists show how the black female character evolved over a thirty-year span. One of the first works addressing identity authored by a black woman was *Iola Leroy*, by Frances E. W. Harper, in 1892. *Iola Leroy* tells the story of a biracial woman’s efforts to find her family and her true identity after the Civil War. Harper writes about the independent, female character that begins to move away from traditional women’s roles. This character becomes educated and makes contributions to her race and community. Her work set the precedent for novelists such as Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen. For example, Jessie Fauset’s first novel, *There is Confusion* (1924), features the protagonist, Joanna Marshall, who desires to transcend cultural lines. Joanna envisions the betterment of a race if the people face the truth fearlessly. Her second novel, *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), focuses on the protagonist, Melissa Paul, a mulatto, who desires to live a life of happiness despite race or family status. Fauset’s female characters move
beyond the Victorian ideal of womanhood and represent a more modern and independent woman who faces the ills of society.

Nella Larsen’s, *Quicksand* (1928), exposes the all-too-common issue of double consciousness among black women. As explained by W. E. B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the Negro in America is defined only through the eyes of others. “One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (DuBois 2). The double consciousness struggle for identity as defined by DuBois is two-fold. On one hand, the Negro struggles to remain true to himself or herself and live according to the constraints society places on him/her even though society may not recognize that they have a heritage that is rich in tradition and valuable. On the other hand, the Negro has to relinquish his/her identity to live according to the standards defined by mainstream society. Larsen’s protagonist, Helga Crane, is an interracial child born out of wedlock, forced to leave the South as a young woman, sent to Denmark, and later forced to return to Harlem. She feels excluded from black society, but is not accepted by white society either. Her problem of racial identity is not uncommon for women living their lives straddling the race line. Helga, like many female characters and women of mixed race, never really finds a place of comfort living among one race or within one community. Instead, her life reflects the lives of many female protagonists who face the issue of passing for white (mulatto women who lived as white women undetected) while in search of their identity in literature.
Finally, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), portrays a woman in literature who was considered to be a renegade and was liberated from the identity crisis faced by her predecessors. Hurston’s character, Janie, lives in a rural township established by and governed by blacks. Janie does not accept the fact that she is a mulatto and seeks freedom from the “double consciousness” that DuBois defined and Larsen and others write about. Promised emancipation with the end of slavery and fooled by the promise of education as the great liberator, the black American in literature (as well as in history) faced the challenge of how to navigate in a white world and how to reconcile their blackness within black communities without offending others. The main characters in Hurston’s novel are free from the scrutiny of white eyes and possess a sense of freedom as a race of people that was not evident in *Iola Leroy* and *Quicksand*. Because Janie’s identity is shaped as a result of throwing off the “false images which have been thrust upon her” (Meese 193), Hurston’s novel takes the issue of female identity to another level. Her work extended beyond Harper’s depiction of Iola Leroy, Larsen’s Helga Crane, and shows the progression of the black female characters of noted authors such as Alice Walker and Toni Morrison.

While looking retrospectively back at African American female characters in fictional literature, it is imperative and critical for this research to reflect upon the historical perspectives that black women in America faced in the 1800s and earlier. Examining African American women’s lives through characterization allows readers and other writers to get a glimpse of what has transpired in the lives of women at a particular time to facilitate an understanding of the female characters in the novels. My belief is
that an understanding of women’s lives has been useful in developing a stronger character in literature. Hazel Carby, in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, acknowledges the importance of female novelists in the history of women and America. Carby states, “The novels of black women should be read not as passive representations of history, but as captive influences within history” (3). Robert Bone, in *The Negro Novel in America*, examines the path of Negro writing in America. According to Bone, the Negro wrote for essentially two purposes. First, the Negro novelist wrote to assimilate with the Western culture as a whole and align black literature with white literature in an attempt to be accepted. Secondly, the Negro novelists wrote to affirm a “Negro quality in his experience” in an attempt to legitimize the Negro contribution to society (Bone 3).

First, writers mirrored the form of Romantic literature in an attempt to break away from the traditions and conventions that were characteristic of the era before and give attention to individualism and freedom. American Romanticism contained some common elements such as the celebration of the individual, love of nature, emotions vs. rationality, power of imagination, and social reform (i.e., women’s rights and slavery). Some of the more noted writers of the Romanic era are Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Washington Irving, and Edgar Allen Poe to name a few. These writers seemed to view the individual in relation to his connection to the natural world. The writers who sought to portray the individual in light of social reform wrote in reaction to the abolishment of slavery after the Civil War. These works came also as a reaction to what is historically known as Reconstruction. Then as post-Reconstruction arrived, the Negro wrote as a part of and in reaction to his social struggles. The historical sequence is
as follows: "An attack on slavery by the Abolitionists, a counterattack by writers of the so-called plantation tradition, reinforced by genteel advocates of white supremacy; then a spirited defense by Negro writers themselves, which began on a large scale during the 1890s and has continued to the present day" (Bone 21).

The Abolitionist novels of Clotel, by William Wells Brown, and Iola Leroy combine elements of abolitionism with attacks on the caste system in America. An activist in the abolitionist struggle, Frances Harper was a mature woman by the time Iola Leroy was published, and she did not write with the urgency that other novels exhibited in the late 1890s. While the novel contains the elements of the slave narrative, Harper writes the novel as fictional rather than factual. This structure allows her to construct a happy ending for the novel’s heroine, Iola. As a female writer of the nineteenth century, Harper “establishes a transition between the requirements of the slave narrator and those of the sentimental writer” (Barker 169).

In early writing (prior to 1800s), the characteristics traditionally associated with women (i.e. nurturing, care giving, submitting, etc.) were presented as negative qualities. Feminist critic Barbara Christian says that “orators such as Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown and Frances Harper as early as the 1830s to the beginning of the Civil War were concerned with countering southern images of not only black men but of black women as well” (Christian, Black Women Novelists 19). Christian notes that authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe in Uncle Tom’s Cabin emphasized the enduring qualities of the servile mammies and uncles of the antebellum days in writing about black men and women in the South. Christian views Stowe’s use of these enduring qualities “not as
reasons for the Negro's inferiority but for his superiority, not as reasons for his enslavement but for his freedom. The affect in literature was the creation of the Negro as a dramatic focal character rather than a comic mirror image” (21).

The portrayal of African American, female characters has generated a new generation of female writings that helped define the literary canon of female writings. The history established by the writings of Frances W. Harper and Nella Larsen in the early years of female writing has propelled Hurston and other female authors to the forefront of women's literature. Harper's *Iola Leroy*, Nella Larsen's, *Quicksand*, and Zora Neale Hurston's, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* detail three women's quest for identity in very determined, yet different paths. I propose that Iola Leroy, Helga Crane, and Janie Crawford are three female characters who withstand the tests of time and emerge as self-realized individuals. The characters struggle against seemingly insurmountable odds emotionally, intellectually, and physically to emerge as women in their own right. Their will to live has not only made them stronger women, but has set them as archetypes for many female characters in the works of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and others who write about female characters that are bold, daring, strong, and continue to defy extraordinary odds. In order for Harper, Larsen, and Hurston to create realistic black female characters, the authors often used their personal stories to parallel the events of the characters.

Author Studies

Frances E. W. Harper
Frances E. W. Harper’s upbringing and personal interests spurred her literary career. Reared in the nineteenth century, Harper’s quest was to find a voice for women living during the Civil War. I. Garland Penn identifies Harper as the “journalistic mother, so to speak, of many brilliant young women who have entered upon her line of work so recently” (Foster 14). Her literary career is applauded by the likes of Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Charlotte Forten Grimke. Her novel, *Iola Leroy*, while not the first written by an African American woman, is hailed as a viable piece of literature in African American literature. Harper advocated the uplifting of her race through her many speeches, lectures, and letters. The confidence of a woman in the early 1880s displayed by Frances Harper was an inspiring model for authors in the years to follow. Her views of the African American woman developed a pattern for other female authors.

CriticsofHarper at the time assert that she was among some of the leading poets in the country at that time that used their works to express their political and moral views. In order to fully evaluate Harper’s works, one must understand the criteria used to place women’s writing in the literary canon. Largely dominated by male influence, women’s writings have for a long time been challenged; however, Harper became a respected writer during a time when United States women American were “increasingly exercising their social and political strength, a time that culminated for black women in the 1890s with a period of intense literary production which they believed heralded the beginning of the women’s era” (Foster 24).
Frances E. W. Harper entered the lecture and literary circuit as a free black. She witnessed the many problems that freed blacks still experienced and became an activist in the abolitionist movement. Following an incident of the death of a freed man in Georgia, Harper became enraged that his freedom was compromised and that in turn would continue to compromise blacks whether free or enslaved. She was a free black living in the North, and she knew that she could very well find herself in the same position if she tried to visit her friends or relatives in cities such as Baltimore, Maryland. The brutal murder of the freed man could not have happened at a better time in Harper's life since she was searching for a way to contribute to her race. In fact, according to William Stills, this heinous crime became a major turning point in Harper's life. “Upon that grave,” Harper wrote, “I pledged myself to the Anti-Slavery cause” (Foster 16). Her commitment to the antislavery cause and her writing created a natural mixture. Writing pieces of works for abolitionist papers allowed Frances Harper to publish many poems in response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Her success as a serious lecturer and antislavery worker came at a time when her youthfulness (she was under thirty years old) and her single marital status were generally frowned upon by society. The prevailing ideology of womanhood and woman’s concerns declared that “marriage was the only proper goal of a woman’s life,” and that “failing to marry was synonymous with failure in life” (12). If Harper was a black woman on an integrated lecture circuit, she would have faced racism and gained little respect. However, Harper's attempts to become an anti-slavery worker on an integrated circuit never daunted her spirit, lectures, writings or her message of equality.
Thus, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's art to weave fact and fiction originated in her quest to better her race in a time when the country was still divided to the North and South. Harper states that through her main character in *Iola Leroy*, she wanted to awaken "in the hearts of our countrymen a stronger sense of justice and a more Christlike humanity" and to "inspire the children" to "embrace every opportunity, develop every faculty, and use every power God has given them to rise in the scale of character and condition" (Harper 34).

Harper herself acknowledges that black folk are capable of seeing "visions" for events in both this world and beyond. These visions give black women an advantage because of the marriage between the feeling heart and the thinking brain. This perception of education applies to women generally and to African American women specifically. If local laws are to align with spiritual laws, then those who hold the tools of education must learn how to use them by looking, with feeling hearts to African American culture.

As a writer and lecturer, Harper used language that was "chaste," "moral," "slender and graceful," and contained a "soft musical voice." Although described as "lady like," Harper was known to have a strong personality which was exhibited once when she refused to leave a railroad car because of her race. Persons close to Harper say that in action and attitude, Harpers' tactics "foreshadowed those employed by Daisy Bates, Coretta Scott King, Rosa Parks, Mary Church Terrell, and other black middle-class women who did not hesitate to lay aside their cloaks of decorum and social graces, flex the muscles of their displeasure, and then calmly wrap themselves again in dignity" (16).

Nella Larsen
The second correlation in the pathway to unfolding the identity of the black female character is Helga Crane in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, which is a novel that portrays the life of a mulatto who passes as a white woman for a good portion of the novel. Helga, born to a Danish mother and black father, lives much of her life without an identity and thus a voice. (She is rendered voiceless for much of her life.) Whether she assimilates with the blacks in Naxos, Alabama, and Harlem, New York, or whether she is exploited by Dane in Denmark, Helga Crane is an independent-minded woman seeking self-discovery in a complicated world. Helga’s independence never manifests itself into an independent voice like that of Iola’s or Janie’s, but her character is a mix between the first and latter female protagonists.

Thus, the continuum of female identity moves beyond Iola’s awakening, to Helga’s stagnation, and provides hope for the yet to be developed Janie at this point in literary history. Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* represents a middle representation of the African American female in her quest for identity. When Nella Larsen wrote *Quicksand*, the concept of the New Negro’s identity had been absorbed by many of the scholarly and intellectual blacks in the country. Larsen is associated with being a pivotal player in the birth of the Harlem Renaissance, and possibly juxtaposes her personal frustrations with living between races with the frustration that Helga feels trying to find her identity. “A key to survival in the mecca of the New Negro seemed to be to play the part the cultural script assigned and keep one’s feelings safely hidden,” comments Cheryl A. Wall regarding the New Negro theory (28). Larsen seems to place Helga in that state of confusion displayed by blacks during the time of the Renaissance. Frustrated by trying to
fit the mold of a middle-class black, Helga, like many blacks of the 1920s, was faced with the dilemma of who they really were outside of the culturally enriching environment of Harlem and outside of middle class views.

Larsen seems to criticize the New Negro theory through her portrayal of Helga Crane. The New Negro defined largely by his race and middle-class status failed to satisfy him or herself or those outside of the circle of racial and class boundaries at a deeper level. The issue of race was further complicated when one assumed this role as portrayed in the novel *Quicksand*. George Hutchinson concludes in his study of race, entitled “Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race,” that “*Quicksand* ... was in part a satire of black and white obsessions with racial integrity” (Hutchinson 342). The New Negro identity was not a reality for many of the Harlem residents, no matter how much they wanted to assimilate. Helga’s contact with the New Negro philosophy is the driving force behind her decision to flee to Denmark.

The main character in the novel, to some extent, holds similarities to the author’s life. Fascinated by the middle-class and the life style of the Harlem Renaissance, Larsen may have subconsciously given Helga attributes that she herself possessed. Larsen, educated and biracial, would have felt the desire to identify and live among one race of people. Larsen married a Fisk University professor and this act gained her prestige and gave her status when she lived in New York. Once she received numerous awards for her literary genius, Larsen left the comforts of New York and traveled to Europe to live and write. Little is known about Larsen’s childhood, but reports state that she was alienated at home and criticized at school. She attended upper school but was never degreeed. Her
short time spent in Denmark came before the section of *Quicksand* was written. Once she returned to the United States, Larsen quickly became absorbed in the Harlem Renaissance. In her attempt to reconcile her own identity within the black race, Larsen turned to her work to prove her worth as a woman and especially as a black woman in a male-dominated world and artistically-centered movement. When Larsen began to question her life’s purposes, she moved forward with her novel *Quicksand*, which became one of the best examples of writing on the female identity issue of the 1900s.

Zora Neale Hurston

Following in the success of Harper, Larsen, and other Harlem Renaissance writers, both male and female, Zora Neale Hurston emerged as one of the most widely read authors of her time. Penning short stories and novels during the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston is best known for her quintessential novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Despite the personal highs and lows that Hurston experienced, she explored life on her own paying little attention to conventions regarding time, place or gender. Hurston remained true to her roots of Eatonville, Florida, her belief in folk culture, and her need for self-expression, and this is evident throughout her literary works.

Though *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is not Hurston’s autobiography (*Dust Tracks on a Road*, 1942 is the autobiography), many elements of the novel mirror events from Hurston’s life. Janie Crawford, the protagonist, lived her life soul searching for her identity outside of love, marriage, and community. Her experiences in the novel present the most dramatic and perhaps the most rewarding portrayal of a woman in search of
herself. Burdened by the words and actions of her grandmother, Janie leaves her home in haste with a strange man to find that “pear tree” with “blossoms in bloom.”

Hurston’s self-confidence stemmed from her home town, her family, and the self-sufficiency demanded of her after she left home for the world (Hemenway 11). Much of the town of Eatonville is reflected in her many works—the moonlight, tall chinaberry trees, and the horizon. “My shoes had blue-sky bottom to them, and I was riding off to look at the belly-band of the world” (Hurston, Dust Tracks on a Road, 28). Known later in life as an “extraordinarily witty woman,” Hurston was often seen as high spirited, charming, amusing, and impressive. Much of this spirit is what her main character in the novel takes pride in having. Zora kept busy in the social circles of New York, but not without stepping on toes or offending some of her colleagues and acquaintances. Hemenway notes, “Zora still had many rough edges, and her ingenuous excitement contrasted—some thought by design—with New York sophistication” (23).

Later in life, Hurston’s reckless behavior and two marriages likely help to provide background material for her works and contribute to readers understanding parts of her works. Her first marriage to Albert Price III in 1939 was unsuccessful. They were divorced only a year later in 1940. Price, younger than Hurston, was not a positive influence on her like Tea Cake was on Janie in Their Eyes; however, it was reported that Price was twenty-three years old and Hurston thirty-eight.

Despite her unprecedented success as a fiction writer, Hurston’s life was not without controversy. She “found herself in the uncomfortable position of mediating between two spheres of experience, searching for an interpretive voice that would
authenticate both Eatonville and Barnard, a West Indian Hougan [priest of Voodoo religion] and a Guggenheim fellow” (Hemenway 279). Hurston searches in her later years for a voice for the post-Eatonville Zora Neale Hurston. Critics posed that Hurston’s personal life contradicted that of Janie’s and questioned how she could claim identity with the masses, yet affirm the supremacy of the individual. Larry Neal notes that Hurston was “no political radical. She was, instead, a belligerent individualist who was decidedly unpredictable and, perhaps, a little inconsistent” (283). Much like Janie’s return to Eatonville after three marriages, Hurston is torn between what she feels and knows versus what others see. Deep within Hurston, the pride in her town and her heritage reigned supreme, but her constant struggle to fit in is seen on a personal and literary level. Hurston believed that her success grew from the “self-reliance, independence, and self-confidence inspired by familial and communal origins” (283) as displayed through Janie in the novel. As Hurston returned to her native Florida, destitute and resigned, she had lived her life to the fullest and come full circle.

Organization of the Study

The literary study presented in this body of writing evolved from my interest in the writings of black, female writers as an undergraduate who studied literature. The female characters of literary works captured my attention and prompted me to question the qualities and qualifications of the women who wrote about these characters who I admired. In some ways, I have been inspired by the courage, boldness, and tenacity of the authors who were responsible for pioneering a new era of writing which helped define black female writing not only in the early years, but in modern time as well. These
female authors have clearly expressed what I deem to be a genuine and realistic view of the struggle of the African American female in literary history.

While *Iola Leroy* serves as the backbone of this literary study, *Quicksand* serves as the bridge between the prototype female character who is self-confident and is seeking independence and the premier female character who epitomizes the ideal identity of the African American female character of the 1920s. The final character in this thematic continuum of female identity unfolding is Janie Crawford, in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, who becomes the next generation of female characters that exemplifies the fully developed African American female character of the 1900s.

In the following chapters, the identity struggles that African American female protagonists faced in novels that spanned thirty years will be discussed. The struggles are presented in chronological order to show the progression of the female character from crisis to self-actualization. The first chapter begins with the character Iola Leroy, a mulatto, who battles and overcomes the social and cultural bonds of slavery as a mulatto. The second chapter focuses on the plight of middle-class Helga Crane (also a mulatto) who struggles to achieve self-identity during the 1920s ideology of the New Negro. Finally, the study concludes with the portrayal of a female character who overcomes the hardships faced by women in the 1800s and early 1900s in an attempt to become a fulfilled individual. This portrayal is of none other than Janie Crawford in Hurston’s quintessential novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Undoubtedly, these three African American novelists capture the journey of the African American female protagonist in literature in a way that began to erode the barriers and stereotypes of black women.
Definition of Terms

Antebellum (1860-1865): The term refers to the time period before the American Civil War. The antebellum culture primarily existed in the southern states since many blacks were enslaved on small farms, plantations, in the fields, and in homes.

Black: The term *black* refers to the system of racial classification for humans of dark skin. However, in the United States, the racial classification refers to those thought to be of African descent. The terms *Negro* and *African American* are used interchangeably to refer to persons in this racial classification in this study.

The Harlem Renaissance (1917-1939): also referred to as "The New Negro Movement," was a culture movement of black writers, artists, and musicians who gathered in Harlem, New York to display their talents.

Mulatto: A person was considered a mulatto if he/she had at least one eighth ounce of black blood running through their veins.

Post-bellum (1866-1913): The period of rebuilding in the United States after the Civil War which primarily transformed the Southern United States (i.e., politically, socially, and economically). This period includes Reconstruction (1863-1877).

Post-Reconstruction (1877-1908): A time when only part of the reconstruction efforts took hold, especially in the South where African Americans still faced discrimination as they tried to make life better. Despite Constitutional amendments and electoral laws, the country experienced many inequalities well into the twentieth century.
CHAPTER 2
THE DISCOVERY OF SELF IN IOLA LEROY

Hidden in the Shadows

*Iola Leroy* tells the story of Iola, a mulatto living during pre-Reconstruction in the North. Her struggle, with her identity as a black woman, is depicted through her interactions with whites and blacks, and details her journey to self-actualization as well. As a result of this struggle, Iola emerges from the shadows of her past. Iola faces two points of crisis in the novel: her existence as a mulatto and her search for her family. Iola Leroy, the main character in Frances E. W. Harper’s novel, is raised as a privileged white woman in the antebellum South. Iola is a Southern girl and a former slave owner’s daughter who is forced into slavery after the death of her father and illness of her mother. After learning that her blood contains an “ounce” of Negro blood, Iola is separated from her mother and commanded to work in the black regiments of the Civil War as a nurse. The first phase of her life is the search for her identity that takes place at the close of the war. During this time Iola vows to search for her mother and brother, Harry, before she does anything else in life. Alone and without any family or friends, Iola desires to reunite with her loved ones. The search for family was a common theme for many black women who had lost touch with family during the days of war and Reconstruction. Jacqueline Jones writes, “Amid the dislocation of Civil War . . . black women’s priorities and obligations coalesced into a single purpose: to escape from the oppression of slavery.
while keeping their families in tact" (51). As a result of her loneliness, Iola makes finding her family a priority.

The first stage of Iola’s self discovery begins when she learns that she is not the product of an illicit interracial relationship as were many mulattos who were products of slavery. Iola is the child of Marie and Eugene Leroy who were a married, interracial couple, and her experiences are different from the typical mulatto daughter of a slave mother and plantation owner father. Most biracial children of plantation owners and slave women were not treated as citizens, and they remained slaves on the plantation or were sold away if conflict arose as a result of negative interactions or conflict with others on the plantation. Additionally, biracial children did not necessarily work as field hands or cooks, but they were not afforded the opportunity to leave the plantation, obtain an education, and live life like a civilized and respected human being as Iola does. A mulatto’s life experience was much like a second class citizen or that of a full-blooded slave. Iola, on the other hand, is reared as a privileged white girl who is afforded luxuries such as attending boarding school because she “passed” for white.

Harper’s representation of what slavery meant for Iola is “indicative of the images that the writer must refute as well as the atmosphere of the Reconstruction period during which the novel was published” (Christian, Black Women Novelists, 26). Iola’s virtue as a black woman is almost always at stake as shown in her continual resistance against the attempts of sex-crazed white men to degrade her. The first incident of this type occurs when Louis Bastine, Mr. Leroy’s attorney, takes advantage of Iola on a train ride. Iola is traveling with Bastine after he has gone to her school to take her home under the pretense
of bringing her to her sick mother. Actually, Bastine’s discovery that Iola is part black results in his intention to make her a slave. On the train trip, Bastine takes liberties with Iola and makes sexual advances. For Iola, this experience is a test of her will and determination as a black woman to not be taken advantage of by others. While sleeping, Iola feels a burning kiss on her lips, springs from her seat with a look of disgust and shouts to her attacker, “How dare you do such a thing! Don’t you know if my father were here he would crush you to the earth?” (Harper 104). Bastine, the “guardian,” ensures her that she is in good hands, but Iola retorts, “My father has made a great mistake, if he thought he had put me in [the] charge of a gentleman” (104). After a few moments of conversation between Bastine and Iola, she exclaims, “I wish it were ended now,” referring to Bastine’s responsibility to escort her home. She is visibly shaken, angry, and mortified that a family friend would take advantage of her. Iola feels disgust for Bastine who treats her as a sexual object rather than a young woman of dignity. She remains stern and reserved for the remainder of the trip. This incident depicts Iola’s unwillingness to be treated like a slave even though she is black.

Although Iola does not know what events lay ahead of her, her inner voice and physical demeanor foreshadow the doom that she faces once she arrives home. Iola is enraged when she learns from her mother that her entire family has been reduced to slavery due to the death of her father. She suggests that the two of them (she and her mother) fight the courts and demand what is rightfully theirs as the heirs of the deceased Leroy’s estate. It is hard for Iola to imagine that she, a young white school girl, has been transformed into a slave overnight. Her strong resolve during this discovery makes Iola
the independent woman that she becomes. Harper's portrayal of Iola indicates, as critic Barbara Christian indicates, that Iola, nor any other woman for that matter, deserves the "brutal, immoral treatment that is a part of the tradition of slavery" (Christian 26). Iola's decision to be viewed as a woman with morals and character contributes to her constructing an identity that is both positive and productive to her future.

Iola's work as a nurse begins her evolution after an encounter with her uncle, Robert Johnson. Thus, her search for her family is heightened by this chance meeting and he pledges to assist her. The two, who meet in the field hospital and travel together in search of their mothers, eventually, reunite in the North. Iola's journey toward independence begins with her appointment as a nurse after her release from slavery. Iola is placed in a field hospital in which she is needed to provide care and comfort to black soldiers. Upon her arrival at the hospital, Iola immediately becomes a favorite among the wounded soldiers as well as with Dr. Gresham, a white physician. Her calm, sympathetic demeanor and faithfulness in fulfilling her duties was observed by Gresham. The two work closely side by side and Dr. Gresham shares books and magazines with Iola so that they can converse and become better acquainted. Eventually, Dr. Gresham becomes smitten by Iola and welcomes her presence at any time.

Gresham, described as an aristocrat from a wealthy family, is mystified by the young black woman's gentle treatment of the black soldiers, her refined manner, and her sad expression at times. Gresham ponders, "I cannot understand how a Southern lady, whose education and manners stamp her as a woman of fine culture and good breeding, could consent to occupy the position she so faithfully holds" (Harper 57). When the
doctor questions the colonel about Iola, he discovers that she has a mixed background and is a former slave. The colonel attempts to discourage him from becoming too interested in her because of her race, yet he realizes that Iola is the ideal woman for him to marry. Gresham feels that Iola is “tender, strong, courageous” and a woman of experience. He sympathizes with her sorrow and has a deep “desire to defend and protect her all through her future life” (58). Dr. Gresham intends to rescue Iola from the hard work at the hospital and the suffering of her past life; however, Iola has other plans related to finding her family who has been separated by slavery. Establishing herself as a free, independent woman who will eventually help uplift her race, Iola intends to remain single.

Iola rejects the advances from Dr. Gresham and others which proves that she is a woman who possesses characteristics atypical of a submissive and weak woman. Instead, Iola is a Christian woman of morals. She bravely refuses Gresham’s hand in marriage saying to herself, “I do like him, but I can never marry him. To the man I marry my heart must be as open as the flowers to the sun. I could not accept his hand and hide from him the secret of my birth . . .” (Harper 111). In other words, Iola refuses to hide her true self from the doctor. She wants the man she marries to accept her as a woman, and most importantly, as a black woman. Iola’s unwavering certainty to embrace her heritage and live as a black woman guided the decisions that she made about her life. As Dr. Gresham’s affection for Iola continues to grow, she engages in an internal struggle to suppress her feelings and insists on informing him of the “insurmountable barrier” that separates the two of them. Her honesty and courage are admirable even to the dejected
Dr. Gresham. She tells Gresham, “I have too much self-respect to enter your home under a veil of concealment” (Harper 117). She further contends that she will not embarrass him by marrying and producing children of “color.” Iola remains committed to finding her mother with the help of her uncle (after being separated by the ills of slavery) and reestablishing a sense of normalcy that she experienced prior to her father’s death. Iola’s sense of responsibility to her race propels her into action as she commits herself to ensuring that the future generation prevails in race matters as a result of her efforts. After surviving the perils of slavery thrust upon her by her uncle and having overcome the loss of her father at an early age, Iola is determined to make her life meaningful and valuable not only for herself but for her family as well.

After years of living with her mother and uncle, Iola’s focus on the progress of her race intensifies. Iola makes it clear that she is more interested in race relations than living carefree as a typical young person does. The conversation about racial uplift and the future belonging to the younger generation is not only critical to Iola’s reconstruction and total commitment to uplifting the race, but it is paramount in improving the lives of women and the progression of the Negro race especially since women have suffered greater ills in slavery than women after slavery. Iola assumes a dual role as a feminist and leader of the uplift movement. She is empowered, perhaps before her time, and sees the need to lead her people. She possesses the qualities of a maverick, one who holds independent views and refuses to conform to the norm. She is a studious and an intellectual woman who realizes the efforts needed to move forward in her society. As a
woman, Iola has donned the badge of true womanhood, even though she has shed, at least for a time, the traditional roles of wifehood and motherhood.

Harper’s shaping of Iola was an attempt to reconstruct the black character from that of Mammie and actually define black women; whereas, fellow author William Wells Brown chose to portray his protagonist, Clotel, as a refined, beautiful, and chaste Christian woman commonly associated with white female characters. As Barbara Christian points out, the attention of Iola Leroy focuses on the “need women feel to work, to be given an opportunity for an education and to be able to participate in intellectual matters” (Black Women Novelists 27). In fact, one of the most significant sections of the novel is the chapter titled “Friends in Council.” In this chapter, Iola and her “circle of high-bred, race-conscious, hard working Negroes as well as a few intellectual whites” meet to discuss issues that will benefit her race (27). This meeting with Iola, her brother, and friends is referred to as a “conversazione.” In a conversation between Iola and her mother, it is established that their family and prominent blacks in the community are meeting to discuss “subjects of vital interest to our welfare,” as stated by Iola (Harper 243). Iola Leroy states that she is glad that the meetings are not a dance or of a frivolous purpose because she had been longing for intellectual interaction and discussions centered on the advancement of the race. Here again, Iola identifies herself with a serious and purposeful focus.

The uplift movement devised by Iola, Harry, and others during the Reconstruction era can be compared to modern organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) which exists to advance the race socially,
economically, and politically. The "uplift movement," as echoed by Marie (Iola's mother) and Robert, will be sustained in future years by the younger generations. Uncle Robert recalls the following insight he had been given years earlier, "the negro belongs to a young race and looks hopefully towards the future" (244). In reality, Robert and Marie have never possessed the skills nor had the opportunity to lead a movement or express themselves freely because of the strict laws of slavery; therefore, they look toward Iola, Harry, Lucille, Harry's female companion, and Dr. Latimer, Iola's future husband, to propel the movement forward. Marie and Robert's new-found trust in Harry and Iola, the younger generation, and others signals a new day for blacks in the novel and in society at large. The wider implications of such a black movement and a female movement are interestingly foreshadowed as early as the writing of Iola Leroy. Harry and Lucille later become leaders of a school, and Iola establishes meetings for mothers and children in her church. Dr. Latimer is a leader in reform movements in his community, and this movement birthed their social activism. The conclusion of the novel finds the Leroy's leading productive lives helping other blacks in their efforts of uplift.

The second phase of Iola's life is just as challenging as the first and tests the strength and determination of the young woman. While Iola struggled in the early years of her life to find herself forced into slavery, her ultimate goal was to locate her family and erase the cycle of not having opportunities because she was black. Much like Frances Harper, Iola intended to break the cycle of her current life experiences in hopes of living life as a fully developed woman. Iola's life finally comes full circle in a positive way once she reconnects with her mother and brother, Harry, and takes an active role in
uplifting her people through her employment, family events, and race relations. Iola’s journey to self-hood becomes imminent because the missing part of her life is no longer missing. With this new connection with her mother, brother, and other relatives, Iola begins to feel whole. Thus, the second half of *Iola Leroy* resolves the conflicts of her identity crisis which is explained in the first half of the novel.

Harper’s juxtaposition of her life to that of the characters is apparent in the novel as well. Harper was active with the young women’s Christian movement and women’s equal rights associations and suffrage associations. The novel’s impact on the race and on women was not known during the late 1890s when the women’s movement became a collective effort in the fight for women’s equality across America. Although some critics have often commented that the novel’s popularity did not come until well after its publication, that simply is not true based upon the impact the novel has had on women’s work after the late 1890s. Today, the novel speaks volumes about the advancement of women and blacks. It is evident that later authors, critics, and leaders did recognize the significance of *Iola Leroy*, and they put the novel’s message to good use. Barbara Christian in *Black Women Novelists* points out:

*Iola Leroy* is an important novel, not because it is a first or because it is a good novel, but because it so clearly delineates the relationship between the images of black women held at large in society and the novelist’s struggle to refute these images—all of this even as the novelist attempts to create a world of characters and situations that can be viewed suitable to the form of the novel, yet realistic enough somehow to resemble life. (5)
While Christian and other critics acknowledge the importance of Iola in shaping female characters in black writing, there is, nevertheless, the discrepancy between the events of the novel and the realities of black women’s lives. Iola, Marie, and Lucille (Harry’s female companion) are portrayed as dignified and respectable women in the novel, but readers should not forget that the three women, unlike typical female slaves, are educated and privileged women in the sense that they have escaped the harsh traditional plantation life. Some critics argue that the three main female characters do not seem fully black; rather they are privileged and more suited to characters in a novel about passing for white as opposed to a novel about women who are proud of their African heritage.

Iola’s Emergence from the Shadows

After Iola reunites with her family in the second half of *Iola Leroy*, Iola’s desire to exceed others’ mere expectations was heightened and Harper’s belief that “women, particularly black women, must be involved in working for the race” (Christian, *Black Women Novelists* 28) propelled her journey toward womanhood further. Iola’s decision to go North—to return to her roots—with her uncle Robert Johnson and brother Harry sets the theme of Iola’s mature identity as a self-actualized woman in motion. It is in the North that Iola is able to gain work, reaffirm her decision not to marry Dr. Gresham, and meet Dr. Latimer, her future husband. Alone and seeking independence, Iola develops into a self-actualized woman, but not without problems.
Iola’s first encounter with discrimination in its truest form occurs when she attempts to obtain housing. When she attempts to reside at an all white Christian boarding house, the boarding house matron realizes that Iola is a “colored woman,” refers the matter to the board who in turn denies Iola housing. Iola is shocked by the response from a religious group of women who literally shut the door in her face because of her black heritage. Similarly, her first job in a retail store is short lived when a fellow sales clerk learns that Iola is of mixed blood. This occurs after a customer, with whom Iola is acquainted with from the “colored” church, converses with her and arouses suspicion among the other sales clerks about Iola’s heritage. The employers, who assume that Iola is white, soon investigate and reveal that Iola is a mulatto. Her second job in New England is successful, yet finding housing remains difficult. However, Iola refuses to be denied the opportunity to live independently and have gainful employment as a black woman. Despite her hardships and disappointments in life, Iola manages to maintain her dignity and persevere until she establishes a beautifully decorated and neatly furnished home for herself and her mother.

As Iola becomes an empowered woman, she moves beyond the limitations of stereotypes. Her character offers “more positive and complex versions of black women than those offered by previous writers” (Elkins 46). Iola is not easily defeated by the problems at work or in other areas of her life. Her perseverance is not seen in earlier works with female mulatto heroines. The mulatto character in previous novels, including Wells Brown’s Clotel, highlighted the white blooded character and characteristics, while Harper’s heroine founded deeper implications for black women:
Iola, as mulatto, allowed Harper to use the literary conventions of women’s fiction and to draw on ideologies of womanhood in her heroine’s fall from security. But the mulatto also enabled Harper to express the relationship between white privilege and black lack of privilege, for her heroine situated her advantages and social position in direct relation to a system of exploitation. (Russell 17)

Iola’s character becomes more than that of a victimized female seeking revenge. She becomes a woman determined to use her education and position in life to impact the masses. Iola’s triumph from the horrific institution of slavery qualifies her as a model for other female characters and actual women. Iola courageously chooses to be known as a black woman at a time when most would shrink at the idea. As Russell points out, She spurns the love of a white doctor, works to ‘uplift’ blacks needing education and guidance, let it be known that women – all women – should work, and has a fruitful and happy life with her mulatto husband, both working for the “betterment” of the Negro race. (18)

Harper’s characterization of Iola reaches far beyond the historical tragic mulatto by showing a woman whose journey to self-discovery and eventual fulfillment as a black woman truly becomes a model for others in African American literature and in actuality.

Iola’s choice to live as a black woman allows her to become a cultural conductor for blacks, particularly women. Her physical beauty, based upon white standards, becomes a conduit for black women. Iola’s fair complexion and genteel upbringing,
which would still allow her to pass for white, perhaps gives her the necessary latitude to speak for and to lead her people. Outside of her community, Iola can seek gainful employment as a nurse, clerk, and teacher to help support her family in an honest way when a former slave of a darker hue would never be hired and respected in the white world. Iola’s brief experience as a slave also gives her an advantage that any free black would not have had. She has knowledge about both cultures, the rules of the “game,” and how to play it as a black and a mulatto. In other words, Iola’s experience of living as both a black slave woman and as a mulatto has equipped her with skills and strategies, such as language, behavior, and customs from each culture, to be successful in both worlds.

Because Iola’s skin color closely resembles that of a white woman, Iola could, if she chose to do so, marry Dr. Gresham, the white doctor, and live a life of luxury. He fails to convince her that their marriage would be successful even though he speaks of colored people and whites working together in the Grand Army of the Republic and the Congress. Gresham believes that the color line is fading, unlike Iola who holds fast to her notion of creating a future for the black people of the South. Iola does not marry the doctor because that would mean living “under a shadow of concealment” which, she states, “I thoroughly hate as if the blood in my veins were an undetected crime of my soul” (Harper 233). Iola’s refusal to pass as white serves as a warning to those blacks at the turn of the century who were passing or who wished to pass.

Through the character of Iola Leroy, Harper appears to take the position that passing is not the moral choice one should make. If Iola lives what she is not, she would
ultimately suffer and lose her sense of self. More importantly, her refusal to marry Dr. Gresham reveals her independent spirit as a black woman. She makes a conscious decision not to compromise her future although her eyes and complexion are the same color as those of Dr. Gresham. Iola makes it clear that marriage is not the culminating event in her life. Instead, she is “indebted to her community for giving her education” and she wonders how “to repay it” (Bande 168). She explains to Dr. Gresham, “It was through their [blacks] unrequited toil that I was educated, while they were compelled to live in ignorance. I am indebted to them for the power I have to serve them. . . Nor am I wholly unselfish in allying myself with the colored people. All the rest of my family have done so” (Harper 235). Iola vows that she will continue this legacy.

After the Civil War, Iola intends to teach in one of the schools for blacks that opened in a city near her. Her education and knowledge of slave children will afford her the opportunity to give back to her community and educate those less fortunate than she. Iola tells Dr. Gresham that she was at one time a favorite among the colored children on her father’s plantation (Harper 145). Although Iola raises suspicion among former slave owners, she gains the confidence and cooperation of her students’ parents: “Her face was a passport to their hearts. Ignorant of books, human faces, were the scrolls from which they had been reading for ages. They had been the sunshine and shadow of their lives” (146). The blacks look to Iola not only for knowledge and learning, but also for life skills. She teaches the students what it means to have character and live a meaningful life. If Iola could inspire the masses through her teachings, she could introduce the expectations of success in the black community. Her influence among the blacks is
overwhelming as is made evident by a huge increase in the enrollment at the school, including adults and children. Not only do the children learn with enthusiasm, but the adults are also eager to become literate. Iola's teachings have far reaching effects in that once educated people empower themselves, they can become businessmen, doctors, teachers, and other professionals. After the school is deliberately torched one night by outsiders seeking to further oppress the blacks' quest for education, Iola says, "I am not despondent of the future of my people; there is too much elasticity in their spirits, too much hope in their heart . . ." (Harper 147). Iola is determined to impart her knowledge and dignity to others no matter the obstacles that confront her.

Iola's character, as the novel's full title suggests, is used to first erase the vestiges of slavery that exist among emancipated blacks in the African American community. She serves as a representative for those women whose skin color does not earn them the rights of the white female, and she represents Harper's desire for blacks to better themselves after the war and the abolition of slavery. Iola is different than the typical sentimental literary mulatto in turn-of-the-century literature because she does not attempt to gain sympathy from the reader. Instead, she represents women who neither have voice or rights themselves. Her character affirmatively indicates that black women should be afforded every opportunity that white women are accorded. In addition, the mixed-race character made the novel interesting and appealed to whites who could identify with the character while reading (Bruce 43). While the writers of the late 1890s wrote fiction to please their audiences, many of their works also protested traditional genteel values and, at the same time, protested the continuing conditions of discrimination towards African
Americans. These novels of pro-civil rights, produced by white and black exponents of abolition, sought to raise the consciousness of Americans towards race relations in the country. Thus, the function of mulatto characters, like Iola, was clear in anti-slavery works. Harper's novel, in a subtle way, spoke toward the social change that needed to occur across the country, and more particularly, she spoke out against the conditions of blacks after the abolition of slavery in the United States. By using the mixed-race female as the central figure in her works, she employed the character “in the traditional sense as an agent of social change and as a symbol of victimization, yet the mixed race character became a figure for political sensitivity and literary vision . . .” (Raimon 7).

A Beacon of Light

Iola's character speaks to the issue(s) of conflict within the African American community based on skin color. Iola's decision to remain a black woman raises the issue of racial identity not just for herself, but for African Americans as a whole. The fact that Iola is of a light complexion offers her no special protection against injustice. The notion that blacks were confronted with little or no choice in their lives, “whatever complexion—or level of culture—in late nineteenth century America” complicates the issue of identity (Bruce 43). The new face of America, as the result of miscegenation began to show itself in lighter complexioned African Americans, would require that no separation of color among races or within the race be evidenced. Thus, this thrust begins, at least thematically, with Iola who, herself, makes no distinction between persons of darker or lighter skin colors in the novel. She treats all persons the same, including dark
complexioned Lucille Delaney and Tom Anderson, a contraband, white Dr. Gresham, and light-skinned Dr. Latimer.

When Iola meets Tom Anderson, a freed slave who has joined the Union Army, the two immediately form a bond. Tom first sees Iola, who is a slave on the plantation of his master, Master Tom. Tom decides that she is not suitable for housework and that he must come to her aid. Tom admires Iola’s beauty and spunk and immediately decides that such a beautiful, refined woman as Iola does not belong in slave status. “I’s got nobody but myself, “said Tom; “but dere’s a mighty putty young gal dere at Marse Tom’s. I wish I could git her away” (Harper 38). He then sets a plan in motion to help free Iola. Tom is anxious to let Iola know about his plan for freeing her and quickly applies to the Commander of his post for her release. Iola learns to respect Tom for his bravery as a soldier and as a member of her race. She does not judge him because he is not educated nor does she treat him as less of a person because of his dark complexion. Instead, Iola accepts Tom for who he is, a black man who has compassion for her, and appreciates what he has done for her. Later in the novel as Tom lies dying of a war wound, Iola sings to him as if he were one of her kin. In a way, she and Tom are related by a sense of kinship and are on one accord in the fight to help freed slaves. Tom admits, “...it does me good to know dat Marse Tom ain’t got her” (Harper 42). This relationship between Iola and Tom Anderson again reinforces the theme that the individuals of the race must work together for the good of the entire race. Tom’s commitment to Iola early in the novel is further reflected later in the novel in her choice to remain loyal to her race regardless of his or her color or status. Since she does not discriminate among those she
meets because of skin colors, Iola becomes a beacon of light for blacks and women, in
particular, who have not found their true identities. Because of her physical beauty and
spiritual virtue, Iola inspires others towards the higher values of life as indicated, “She is .
. . the light by which the shadows will be uplifted” (Christian 29-30).

Tom’s commitment to his race is unyielding and foreshadows future intraracial
relationships among other characters in the novel. Additionally, Iola’s relationship with
Tom Anderson extends to other light and dark-skinned blacks which demonstrates that
Iola’s identity as a mulatto can be used to help her race become progressive (all of the
blacks regardless of shade can work together to uplift the race) rather than remain victims
of Jim Crow laws.

By the end of Reconstruction, the engagement (groups of blacks joining for the
common good) had been made, and blacks and mulattoes together were evolving into a
new generation of blacks who were united and supportive of one another. Although Iola
and Harry are mulattoes, their actions confirm that they believe there are others just as
capable and qualified to become a part of their intimate circle of friends. For example,
the meetings at the Leroy’s house include a variety of people with various backgrounds
including Reverend Carmicle, Professor Gradnor, Dr. Latimer, Mr. Forest, Mrs. Watson,
Miss Brown and other guests who are interested in the future of the race. No distinction
of skin color or background is made when the invitation to meet is extended to them. The
group of blacks come together to organize and establish political, economic, and social
stability among a race of people who desire to bring new order in their lives after years of
slavery. This union of mulattoes and blacks of dark complexion in Iola Leroy was not
uncommon of behavior of lighter skinned blacks in the 1800s. Joel Williamson, in *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattos in the United States*, describes the union between mulattoes and blacks as not merely “an imitation of whiteness or an imitation of mulattoes in their emulation of whiteness. It was rather a culture that was uniquely black, uniquely American, and invaluable for the survival of Negro America” (88). Similar to what Williamson describes, the Leroy represent a unified group despite their hues and shades of blackness.

The entire Leroy family takes the position of promoting racial pride among all blacks in the novel. When Harry tells his family about Lucille Delaney, his dark skinned future wife, he provides his family with the following physical description “she is of medium height, somewhat slender, and well formed, with dark, expressive eyes, full of thought and feeling. Neither hair nor complexion show the least hint of blood mixture” (Harper 199). In other words, Harry feels that his future wife is remarkable, lovely, wise, witty, and dark. Iola and Marie happily greet and welcome Lucille into their family. Harry’s impending marriage to Lucille also pleases Iola and her mother. Iola shows no prejudice toward Lucille and responds by saying, “I am glad of it” (199), referring to Lucille’s pure black heritage. Her opinion is that blacks of unmixed blood who can succeed in literature, sciences, and the arts are a living demonstration that the race is capable of future achievement. Marie also approves of Lucille by saying, “I am very glad to have met you. Young women like you always fill my heart with hope for the future of our race” (200). Their acceptance of the darker Lucille affirms the Leroy’s decision to affiliate with the black community which included living among their race. It is also
important to note that many of the blacks in the North that Iola encounters are educated and dedicated to empowering others of the race. The blacks that Iola encountered are also talented and intelligent in their own right and owe nothing to the whites for their achievements. Marilyn Elkins asserts that Harper’s mulatto characters are “breaking the miscegenation mold, are not passive and suffer no conflicts about acknowledging their racial heritage” (45).

Iola’s Shadows Uplifted

Iola does not discriminate on the basis of skin color in her uplift. Her position as an advocate is indicative of the peace relations between mulattoes and blacks in the South during Reconstruction. According to Joel Williamson, “there began a melding of mulatto and black worlds, not only in politics but in the whole broad array of human endeavor” (78). This is clearly seen in the novel as Iola moves closer towards the uplift movement.

Because of his common intellectual interests such as education, domesticity, and moral progress, Dr. Latimer is the ideal companion that Harper creates to assist Iola and the Leroys in their uplift projects. Latimer, a trained physician who is respected among his profession, moves South just as Iola did to live and work among the emancipated blacks—he as a doctor; she as a teacher. The two agree that “passing” for a light-skinned black is wrong. Iola feels that to pass is to lose honor and self-respect. When Iola learns that Latimer decided not to pass in his own life, she says, “The gain would not have been worth the cost. It were better that he should walk the ruggedest paths of life a true man than tread the softest carpets a moral cripple” (266). “Passing” sacrifices one’s African
birthright for that of European ancestry and makes one dishonorable in his culture. The subject of passing is one that Harper and other successful black authors such as Jacobs, Hopkins, and Larsen spoke against in their works. They espouse that passing is “synonymous with selling-out and is discredited as an alternative for Iola . . .” (Wilson 112). Wilson’s point also reinforces the notion that authors wrote to please white audiences who would have been offended by the deception of blacks who passed for white. It is interesting to note here that although Latimer admires Iola’s beauty, he is more awed by her voice, “The tones of her voice are like benedictions of peace; her words a call to higher service and nobler life” (Harper 257). Whether Latimer is writing a book or treating patients, he agrees with Iola that women should take an active role in the movement. Latimer joins in the “conversations” with the other men, while Iola and her mother take an active role in the movement.

Latimer also becomes a proponent of the independent woman. He believes that women should play a significant role in their community. As a result of Latimer’s beliefs about women’s independence and role in society, Iola is a perfect companion for Dr. Latimer. In fact, the union between Iola and Frank Latimer is based upon shared racial and moral concerns. As Elsa Nettles states,

Harper, in allowing Iola’s marriage to Latimer to be a partnership based on common intellectual pursuits and goals, avoids the patriarchal trappings of marriage as an institution that brings women under the protecting arms of a husband. (Nettles 231)
Their partnership is progressive in that they are partners who have committed to common goals and shared roles. Their relationship “avoids the patriarchal trappings of marriage as an institution that brings women under the protecting arms of a husband” (Nettles 231). Iola’s future with Latimer perhaps becomes an example for post-Reconstruction women who sought independence and freedom from traditional marriages. Had Iola married Dr. Gresham earlier in her life, she would have compromised her belief that mulattoes did not have to sacrifice their blackness and most likely would not have been able to make the type of contribution to women’s rights that she desired. Her mission in life is to commit to a shared dream and she is able to fulfill her mission through her equal partnership in marriage to Frank Latimer:

Kindred hopes and tastes had knit their hearts; grand and noble purposes were lighting up their lives; and they esteemed it a blessed privilege to stand on the threshold of a new era and labor for those who had passed from the old oligarchy of slavery into the new common wealth of freedom.

(Harper 271)

Thus, a part of Iola’s adult identity becomes that of a partner in marriage rather than an object. Together, Iola and Frank Latimer will lead concerted efforts to ensure that the posterity of the race is secured.

Iola’s views of women becoming independent and working outside of the home are more representative of a post-Reconstruction woman who has an identity outside of marriage. Venetria Patton, in Women in Chains, notes that in the writing of Iola Leroy, Harper neither “reaffirms male hierarchy, nor female superiority; rather she argues for
equality between the sexes” (103). As suggested by Harper’s characterization, while men and women are definitively different in their perspectives on domestication and involvement in the public sector, they should be equally valued. When Reverend Eustace, at an uplift meeting, agrees that “enlightened” mothers (ones who are aware that there must be a balance between maternal and paternal influences) are necessary, Lucille adds that “enlightened” fathers are also necessary. Lucille states, “If there is anything I chafe to see it is a strong, hearty man shirking his burdens, putting them on the shoulders of his wife and taking life easy for himself” (Harper 253). Lucille also places an importance on the shared responsibilities of men and women in a relationship. Iola responds by saying that not only are adults responsible for raising children in a union, but she believes that adults must instill in youth the meaning of true womanhood and manhood. Iola says that, “We must instill in our young people that the true strength of a race means purity in woman and uprightness in men; who can say with Sir Galahad; My strength is the strength of ten, because my heart is pure” (254). In addition to developing character in young men and women, the uplift movement will help educate people in matters of the home, church, and relationships. Through many discussions among the young black people, Iola and company resolve that a strong woman has many capabilities and is worthy of serving her community and society at large, but they also acknowledge the importance of equality among men and women in order to become successful.

Iola’s journey from childhood to adulthood and from crisis to identity helps to develop her into a self-actualized woman. Born a mulatto, separated from her parents,
and remanded into slavery, Iola Leroy is a young woman who refuses to pass as white and who will not be defined by any negative labels in reference to her race. Instead, Iola Leroy reverses the outcomes of two adverse events to aid her on her journey towards self-discovery for positive results. The first was her discovery that she is black and must work as a slave without any knowledge of her mother. She actually finds her mother and this reunion leads to the uplift movement and Iola’s independence as a self-sufficient and confident woman. The second occurrence was the choice that Iola has to make between marrying a white doctor or being courageous enough to live a life of uncertainty as an independent, black woman. She defies the odds of the roles of most mulatto women by becoming a nurse, a salesclerk, a teacher, and a businesswoman rather than serving as a mistress or a servant. Through many years of hardship and struggle, Iola becomes a free and independent woman who makes her own living and creates a model for women to emulate.

Iola develops into a strong, confident, and outspoken woman in matters concerning women and her race. Her outspoken character is not submissive, and she is not easily manipulated by her oppressors. Venetria Patton notes that “Iola’s lack of submissiveness does not ‘unwoman’ her; rather, Harper defines submissiveness so that it is more egalitarian” (108). Iola respects the opinions of her Uncle Robert, Harry, and Frank Latimer, yet she is not dominated by them. She maintains her own independent spirit and becomes a respected woman by the men and women in her life. As a self-assured woman who connects with an understanding man, Iola becomes a model for her community and for future female characters in literature.
Iola’s position as a mulatto woman who seeks to define herself as a woman on her own terms is at the center of uplifting the race in Iola Leroy. Christian characterizes Iola as a “cultural missionary to the ignorant, the loudmouthed, the coarse but essentially good-natured blacks who need only to be shown the way” (Christian 29). During the war, the general and other soldiers admire Iola’s beauty and modest demeanor. The general, who is shocked at Iola’s refinement, notes that her face was full of earnestness, sympathy, and compassion. He observes, “The beautiful girlish face was full of tender earnestness. The fresh young voice was strangely sympathetic, as if some great sorrow had bound her heart in loving compassion to every sufferer who needed her gentle ministrations” (Harper 39-40). During her time as a field nurse for the Union Army, she displays a loving heart and knows how to treat those who are suffering. She stands by the bedside of wounded soldiers and speaks gently to them, and sometimes sings to them to soothe their aching bodies. Her service as a military nurse prepares her for service as a leader of the uplift movement. The hope that she sees in the soldiers she nurses and the students she teaches gives her the vision to see hope in the future for her race.

Iola’s journey to self-discovery is complete as she takes a stand for issues that she believes in. She is a proponent of justice, equality, and self-preservation. Iola fully emerges from the clouds of slavery, discrimination, fear, and uncertainty to come forth as a woman who is determined, dedicated, and dignified. She finds that she possessed the tools to uplift her shadows. These tools are internal and allow her to emerge from a dark, racist world into a place where she can live life on her terms. Once she makes that discover with the association and assistance of others, she claims the fulfillment that she
is entitled to have. Harper’s creation of the character Iola Leroy was influenced by events and circumstances occurring in the 1890s. Her desire to create a black, female character who was womanly, yet independent, beautiful, yet intelligent was one of the first of its kind. The next portion of this chapter details Harper’s influence on other black, female protagonists in literature.

Harper’s Influence

Hazel Carby, in her introduction to *Iola Leroy*, states that the novel should be regarded “as integral to and a very important part of both the wider context of the black woman’s movement [at the turn of the century] and of Harper’s intellectual project” (Harper xv). Likewise, Marilyn Elkins, in her article, “Reading Beyond the Conventions: A Look at Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted*,” believes that the novel deserves a significant place in the literary canon and is critical in both subject and timing. Written at a time when slavery ended and Reconstruction began, *Iola Leroy* offers perspectives that are not based on black or white, but pertinent in the “critical acceptance of writing by black women” (52). The novel also attempts to erase black female character stereotypes (such as cook, maid, mammy, and jezebel) that were previously dominant in novels by white writers and male writers. Harper’s depiction of Iola does create a positive and progressive character who helps advance the role of women in literature. Her character is that of a female with “virtues, values, and actions that counteract rampant commercial and mechanistic interests” relative to the black role of women in the 1890s or when the novel was published (Carby 94-95). The development of Iola’s character comes at the threshold of the women’s suffrage era and
becomes a prototype for the confident, self-actualized protagonists in Harlem Renaissance novels. Critics like Nina Bayam suggest that, as a model, Iola Leroy is just a continuation of the tragic mulatto with variations on a conventional literary theme. However, the argument can be made that Iola is different in that not only is she a heroine that represents the institutional injustices against blacks, but she is a heroine who represents black women in a more positive and influential role. Creating a character such as Iola Leroy, Harper set the stage for a more positive representation of a black female character of any hue. This positive outlook for the female character gave women a voice and an identity with which to feel connected. Like other African American writers, Harper sought to preserve and record experiences of black women through their literary creativity. In addition, other writers were encouraged to use this method of storytelling in order to preserve the history and lineage of black Americans for posterity.

Pauline Hopkins’ *Contending Forces* is a good example of Harper’s influence on post-Reconstruction writers who exhibit some of the characteristics of the character, Iola Leroy. In *Contending Forces*, Hopkins drew upon the experiences of Frances Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells as well as others who were shaped by a movement of women. Hopkins’ fiction mirrored their works, but extended beyond their characterization and themes. Her fiction was written with the purpose of inspiring her black readers to engage in social and political action (Carby 120). In the introduction to *Contending Forces*, Hopkins states that her desire is not to become famous, but to “raise the stigma of degradation from my race” (Hopkins 33). She further explains that the purpose of black literature should be to preserve “the innermost thoughts and feelings of
the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history” (Hopkins 7). Her belief that fiction serves as a “vehicle of racial advancement” is evident in

Contending Forces

Hopkins’ mulatto character in Contending Forces, Sappho Clark, addresses the social and political issues surrounding the black woman. Sappho is a character that can be added to the literary canon as an example of a woman who is strong, womanly, and independent. Sappho Clark, like Iola, cannot be defined by the white values or norms of society; instead, she also seeks individual freedom through her own experiences as a mixed-race woman looking for work, suitable housing and a better life living among her race, and creates a world for herself not characterized by any standards other than her own. Sappho is the product of a wealthy New Orleans family of mixed racial ancestry. She is raped by her own uncle at age fifteen, forced into prostitution by him, and gives birth to a child as a result. She is eventually rescued by her father from a brothel and finds work to support herself and her child. In the process of trying to join others in order to uplift the race, another attempt to sexually assault her is made by John Langley, her friend’s, Dora Smith, fiancé. Despite the adversities that Sappho faces, she is a strong, independent woman who survives despite the many social and political ills of slavery and Reconstruction that she endures. Sappho’s life reminds readers of the cruel treatment of female slaves while simultaneously examining the particular struggles of mulatto women to obtain a respectable living and education. Carby notes that Sappho and Dora are the “independent women who in their intimate moments together talked of
the need for suffrage and the political activity of women” (142). Sappho’s turbulent history transforms these tragic events and influences her interactions with other women.

Hopkins’ novel continues the theme of uplift and survival that began in Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy*. Sappho realizes that she has an obligation to her son and begins to seek a new life. At the pinnacle of her life, Sappho marries Will Smith, a black intellectual and activist. Together, the two of them vow to work toward the racial uplift of men and women in their community much like Iola and Dr. Latimer and Harry and Lucille Delaney. By the novel’s end, the young people have committed to the struggle for civil rights and vow to withstand any challenges that may stand in their way.

Not only does the theme of racial uplift appear in *Contending Forces* and *Iola Leroy*, the shared ideas of W. E. B. DuBois, as espoused in his writings and speeches are also evident in both works. In *The World Africa*, DuBois states, “Since the rise of the sugar empire and the resultant cotton kingdom, there has been a consistent effort to rationalize Negro slavery by omitting Africa from world history” accompanied by an “all-pervading desire to inculcate disdain for everything black” (qtd. in Japtok 10). The presence of a superior race of African Americans as alluded to in the DuBois text is evident in Harper’s and Hopkins’ novels and personal statements. Hopkins attempts to emphasize the importance of African ancestry in the lives of African Americans. Her belief that the past greatly influences the future challenges readers to question the role of African Americans as leaders of the race in the future. The texts of the two authors, Harper and Hopkins, seem to suggest that much of the African culture possesses “wealth, technological prowess, organizational sophistication, etc.” and these traits “... will cause
African Americans to embrace Africa and simultaneously elevate African American
cultural self-esteem” (qtd. in Japtok 10).

The writings of Pauline Hopkins, W. E. B. DuBois, and other advocates of African American development, share the same sentiment that African Americans must take charge of their lives in order to truly understand themselves. More plainly stated, “Only by grappling with the meaning and legacy of slavery can the imagination, recognizing finally the temporality of the institution, begin to transcend it” (McDowell and Rampersad 123). DuBois’ thoughts on the “souls” of his race tread new territory compared to the thoughts of Booker T. Washington in *Up from Slavery*. DuBois was a visionary who would not only “depict the present state of black culture but also try to prophesy something about its future and the future of the nation” (McDowell and Rampersad 111).

An advocate and writer in her own right, Hopkins would have certainly heard DuBois speak and read his work prior to the publication of *Iola Leroy*. Therefore, Hopkins looks toward the future as well. Her decision to write a novel that is not a typical sentimental novel both in setting and characterization breaks new ground for the time in which it was written. Readers can see parallels to some of the ideals expressed in the philosophy of DuBois in Hopkins’ work. Overall, the theme of racial uplift present in Hopkins’ work echoes the importance of building the culture from the past experiences and from within the race.

Hopkins’ and Harper’s strong, independent characters propelled novels of the late nineteenth century that influence the themes and subjects of subsequent authors. The
similarity in themes of uplift and independence in the novels of Harper and Hopkins sets the tone for writers after Harper in the same century and beyond. Hopkins follows and in turn, incorporates romance, history, and family values as the key to building history within the race. Together, Harper and Hopkins establish heroic roles for women which were limited in the 1890s and infuse their narratives with the realities of black history (Campbell 41).

Their works link the antebellum period with the Harlem Renaissance and also adumbrates major concerns of later Afro-American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison with its emphasis on the necessity for knowing one’s past to establish one’s present identity, the empowering aspects of the oral tradition within the black community, and the necessity for language for empowerment. (Elkins 52)

As Elkins states, Harper's and Hopkins' female characters began a legacy in literature among female characters who overcame great obstacles and the perils of slavery in the nineteenth century and evolved into strong, independent women. Their independent spirits and progressive visions created a newly authenticated woman for the next century. This new woman, as depicted in literature at the turn of the century, helped define the standards for subsequent female characters. Therefore, the writers of the Harlem Renaissance such as Nella Larsen emerged because of the foundations set forth by Frances Harper and Pauline Hopkins.
NOTES

1. A mulatto is defined as a person having one white and one Negro parent. Additionally, a person of mixed Caucasian and Negro ancestry is considered a mulatto. Mulatto, as used in this paper, is a light-skinned black person.

2. The function of such characters in anti-slavery fiction was clear. The work was destined to meet the expectations of mainstream sentimental literature by casting the mulatto as a key character. Second, the mixed race character made the novel interesting and something whites could identify with while reading (Bruce 43).

3. Black women writers like Harper wrote to liberate and reform negative images of women. Women were basically seen in two ways, “mules” or jezebels. They were believed to be non-virtuous, sex-crazed, and loose. To counter these negative images, writers fashioned their characters to be virtuous, skilled, confident, and independent. As suggested, “Ms. Harper overtly espoused the temperance cause through her novels, one concludes that the perusal of genteel middle class values points to temperance sympathies among the other authors” (Brown 87).

4. It is important to note that other blacks of Iola’s generation were not as actively involved in the uplift movement as she and her family. Being of a darker skin and lower economic group, most blacks still lived in poverty unable to find work or worked for whites or in manual labor situations.

5. At the same time that Iola moves towards self-definition, women in the world gained momentum with an organization led by Marcus Garvey, The Universal Negro Improvement Association (Dubois 193). This organization empowered women with the
help of Amy Jacques Garvey, the wife of Marcus Garvey. She believed that women were “the center of the present and future of civilization.” She urged women to show “the world the worth and ability of Negro women, and gain the appreciation of our own men whose lives are guided by our influences and who get inspiration from us” (194). For Amy Jacques Garvey, the new Negro woman was much like the old one. The new Negro woman should “(1) Work on a par with men in the office and the platform, (2) Practice thrift and economy, (3) Teach constructive race doctrine to children, (4) Demand absolute respect of the race from all men, and (5) Teach the young to love race first” (194).

Likewise, many men countered this mindset which pitted the working Negro woman against the working-class Negro man. Women were encouraged to continue to work despite the long hours and the time away from their children. Working, according to Sadie T. M. Alexander, was good for the immediate needs, but also for the future and well-being of women in general. Women, she noted, had to “place themselves again among the producers of the world” and be involved in work “that resulted in the production of goods that have a price in value.” (196). Her belief that women working outside of the home would prove more valuable to them than sacrificing self for the sake of male wishes. Later, W. E. B. Dubois concluded, “... The matter of economic independence is, of course, the central fact in the struggle of women for equality” (197). By the late 1920s, many shared the sentiment that black women must have a life of work and economic independence. Dubois also notes, “No woman would better personify or work more vigorously toward those goals than Mary McLeod Bethune, whose presence would dominate black women’s history in the decades to come” (197).
6. Sappho’s lack of rights as a woman and an African American do not afford her any opportunity to find a reputable position in life. Instead, her life is plagued by abuse and mistreatment by white men who care nothing about her or the quality of her life. In fact, her virtue as a black woman is challenged in much the same way as is Lola’s integrity by the attempted rape by her father’s attorney.

7. It is important to note that Dora and Sappho have become best friends at the boardinghouse run by Dora’s mother, Mrs. Smith. This house becomes the center of black social and political meetings of the young friends of the Smith children. It is ironic that the meeting place for uplift and empowerment is the same scene where Sappho is violated. This close relationship between Dora and Sappho makes John Langley’s sexual advances more appalling.

8. Hopkins, like Harper, was outraged by women’s victimization and felt that black women deserved better treatment. They also applauded black motherhood in their works believing that families that were able to reunite after slavery should be celebrated. She also hoped that mulatto women would overcome the violence and trauma she endured during slavery. Her vision for woman of color included women who became educated and worked outside of the home. Because of this vision, her female characters in her works saw themselves as a part of shaping the history by shaping their own self-worth.
Readers of *Iola Leroy* are taken on Iola's journey of self-discovery that centers on the central theme of race and identity. The search for self is also evident in the next character of this study, Helga Crane, who is the protagonist in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand.* Although Helga's character was created thirty-six years after Iola Leroy's character, they both face some of the same issues. Helga Crane represents a more progressive black female character than the black female characters that had been previously portrayed in earlier works written by black female authors. Similarly, Iola and Helga are mulattoes who become victims of racial and gender oppression, and they both embark on the road to confirming and affirming their identities based on making connections with their families. While Iola is happy to identify with her race, once she discovers from her uncle that she is of mixed heritage, Helga is less proud to accept her black heritage. Helga, the product of a Danish mother and black father (who left Helga and her mother penniless and poverty-stricken when she was a toddler), rejects her blackness early in the novel. Acceptance of self is the major difference between the two characters, and this leads them on two very unique journeys towards self-discovery. Iola’s self-discovery evolves from discovering and accepting her ancestry and building relationships with her
immediate and extended family. Helga, on the other hand, must forge on an uncertain path without the aid of her family, and her ability to negotiate her world as both a black and white woman impedes her progress in some instances. Larsen creates Helga Crane as a mulatto who is objectified in both the black and white worlds. Unlike Iola, Helga is aware of her mixed heritage from the beginning of the novel, thus the issue of identity for Larsen’s protagonist is not whether she is white or black; instead, the identity crisis for Helga Crane centers on the internal conflict of affirming her heritage as a black woman and her decision to either live within the black or the white community. Throughout most of the novel, readers observe the life Helga has experienced living between both worlds.

Helga moves constantly throughout the novel. Her story begins in Naxos, Alabama, continues in Harlem, New York, is followed by a stay in Copenhagen, Denmark, then she moves back to New York, and, finally, she lives in rural Alabama. Her migrant-like state represents the central conflict of the novel, or, more exactly, the crises that Helga faces living as a black woman in black communities in America and those she encounters passing as a white woman in a foreign land (Denmark). During the course of the novel, Helga enjoys many options unavailable to many women of her ethnic group. She can “pass” for a white woman (“passing” refers to an ethnic minority who is unrecognizable as such to others based on his/her complexion or other physical features which allows him/her to receive the privileges of being white); live as a black woman, as she does in Naxos, Harlem, and rural Alabama; and travel the world and work in any capacity due to her mixed heritage and financial resources. Yet her freedom does not
yield the happiness she seeks. The issue of her identity remains a problem which leads to her constant soul searching. Lecturer and author, Hugh Gloster, President Emeritus of Morehouse College, proposes that “because of her questionable background, Helga cannot integrate herself into either race” (Saunders 15; Cronin 143). In addition, Helga’s heritage keeps her from fully participating and affiliating in the communities of either race. Gloster’s assertion is one that is validated by Helga’s migration and uneasiness in the many places that she lives.

Nella Larsen’s development of Helga Crane is a bridge between Frances Harper’s Iola Leroy and post-Harlem Renaissance female characters and authors. Larsen created a tragic biracial figure who is more progressive than Iola; however, happiness and independence still eludes the black woman despite Helga’s opportunities. Helga has more options than Iola, yet she does not have the confidence and strength characteristic of black, female characters who will be introduced in the works of Zora Neal Hurston, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and others. Typical of the traditional mulatto, Larsen’s character is beautiful and well-educated, but she does not fit as readily into her role as a black woman who accepts her heritage and commits to working towards uplift as does Iola Leroy. Instead, Helga departs from the traditional role of the female mulatto character who usually becomes involved in racial uplift. Cheryl Wall’s article, “Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen’s Novels,” contends that “Larsen’s protagonists assume false identities that ensure social survival but result in psychological suicide. In one way or another, they all ‘pass.’ Passing for white, Larsen’s novels remind us, is only one way the game is played” (98). While Larsen’s protagonists,
particularly Helga in this instance, manage to pass for white, Helga does not succeed in winning the game as a woman with a “wholly integrated identity” (98). Helga Crane does not consistently pass for white but instead, vacillates between both the black community in America and the foreign white community in Denmark without finding her true self. Helga Crane, objectified from the onset of the novel, is not satisfied with the status quo. *Quicksand* shows the progression of Helga’s confusion as a black woman who becomes engulfed in the quagmire of her own uncertainty and unhappiness.

Stepping into the Quicksand

Helga’s identity crisis begins with her employment in what she perceives is the ideal setting for promoting blackness—Naxos College. Crane, twenty-two years old as the novel opens, arrives at the college open-minded and excited about being among blacks at an all-black school. The college, located in Naxos, Alabama, is often compared to Tuskegee University, formerly known as Tuskegee Institute. Some critics suggest that the significance of Naxos is to highlight Nella Larsen’s personal experience at Tuskegee Institute. After Larsen studied nursing at Fisk University and worked in that field, she took a job at Tuskegee and worked there for one year as a nursing supervisor from 1915-1916. Her stay there was short-lived because she became disillusioned with the ideals of Booker T. Washington and disagreed with the strict and stifled environment that the school promoted. The description of Helga’s tenure at Naxos in the novel gave Larsen a forum to provide social commentary on her views of black education at Tuskegee
Institute. Thus, Helga’s Naxos experience is representative of Larsen’s experience at the all-black college.

Helga is dissatisfied working in Naxos although her position as a teacher is honorable and the setting is ideal for heightening a sense of racial consciousness and black pride. First, Helga is dissatisfied with the ideals of the school, but even more crucial to her unrest is her deep, internal unrest and dissatisfaction. She thought that Naxos would be able to suppress her angst and anxiety, but those thoughts were brought to the surface through the events that she encountered at the school. Helga thinks with disgust, “Since her arrival in Naxos, she had striven to keep those ends of the days from the intrusion of irritating thoughts and worries” (Larsen 36). The rules of the school are restricting to Helga who desires a more expressive environment.

Helga is ostracized on the Naxos campus because of her outer appearance. She does not feel comfortable because her beauty, choice of clothing, and her ideas of racial pride, independence, and self-expression are dramatically opposed to those of the institution which showed no signs of changing its ideals and practices. Helga views the school as a barrier to her progress or happiness in life, unlike her predecessor, Iola, who settles comfortably in an all black environment to help her fellow man, as well as herself, progress in life. Naxos, the all-black school, is run by a black headmaster and a staff of other young black teachers; however, Helga feels out of place and alienated among her colleagues. Reflecting on her experience at Naxos, Helga thinks, “How pathetically she has struggled in those first months and with what small success” (Larsen 42). Helga feels stifled and trapped in an environment that is not befitting her. Larsen describes Helga as
dressed in colorful, elaborate clothes, and her room is luxuriously furnished with black and red lamp shades, blue Chinese carpet, and oriental silk which draws criticism from other staff members employed by the college who were not as fashion conscious as Helga. The other women of the school often await Helga’s arrival at school functions to see her “unusual” dress. She finds escape from the dull, drab campus surroundings in her room which is an expression of her individuality. As noted in the novel, “All her life Helga Crane had loved and longed for nice things . . . It was this craving, this urge for beauty which had helped to bring her into disfavor in Naxos” (Larsen 41). In fact, Helga places herself and her physical appearance above everything else in the novel. Her obsession with nice things almost becomes a substitute for the absence of family and friends in the novel. She realizes at some point that superficially, her sophisticated taste in clothing and furnishings sets her apart at Naxos and shapes the way in which others respond to her (Wall, “Passing for What?” 98). This pre-occupation that Helga has with her physical appearance affects her ability to connect with her inner feelings and others in her immediate circle. Her interactions with others are distant at best and she never really commits to building positive, meaningful relationships. Her only friend is Margaret, a colleague, who urges her to stay at Naxos “to brighten our sad lives” (Larsen 49). Margaret believes that Helga’s presence is unique at the school and that to lose Helga would somehow make things dull and drab. This upsets Helga because she does not want others to predetermine her future or infuse their values upon her.

The relationships that she establishes with others are indicative of her objectified status among her Naxos colleagues and staff. Margaret, a dark-skinned woman, has a
negative self-image and believes, like others, that light-skinned, pretty women like Helga should assume an ornamental role. Margaret’s thinking is not unlike that of the president, Robert Anderson, of the college. He, too, views Helga as an aesthetic addition to the school rather than a woman who is capable of adding something to the education of students. His rationale for wanting her to stay at the school is purely selfish. Anderson tells Helga at one point, “What we need is more people like you with a sense of values, and proportion, an appreciation of the rarer things of life. You have something to give which we badly need here in Naxos” (Larsen 54). Anderson reveals that someone like Helga—pure, inexperienced, and unexposed to the hypocrisy of many communities—might actually be good for Naxos to help promote the ideals of the school.

Thus Helga’s role as a prized possession because of her physical attributes begins. Larsen’s placement of Helga in a dull, drab, school setting highlights the status of women as objects in literature. Often viewed as woman of status in some black communities, the mulatto (who is often compared to the refined, Victorian woman) is generally a beautiful, dignified, and graceful woman as opposed to the darker hues of blacks presented in literature. The common views of women and womanhood prevalent during that time does not make the president’s comments shocking, and demonstrate that he views Helga no differently than anyone else on the campus. Her presence brings variety to the campus, and Helga’s ornamental style is Larsen’s attempt to contradict prevailing beliefs of how black women should look and conduct themselves. According to Cheryl Wall, Helga’s problem is a “real struggle against imposed definitions of blackness and womanhood” (98). Helga refuses to be defined in the typical sense of the tragic mulatto,
and she refuses to be labeled as a sexually promiscuous woman. The difference in Helga’s struggles as opposed to those of other literary mulattos is her refusal to “accept society’s terms in the face of her inability to define alternatives” (Wall 98-99). According to Wall, Helga is unable to live like one or find alternatives to that life of a mulatto without unrest and prejudice within the black community. The role of African American women in the community plays a large part in how they are perceived in society at large. However, it is not just that Helga is a mulatto or a woman, but that she is also limited by perceptions within the black community. Helga is expected to be a “trophy” wherever she goes—something beautiful to be admired, yet exploited. However, Helga seeks more than superficial value in order to consider herself meaningful as a teacher at Naxos, and she is not afraid to let Margaret and others know that she considers herself more than an ornament. She has problems conforming to the principles of the school, and believes that Naxos’ mission of shaping young minds is hypocritical in its actions.

She feels that the school does not offer any individuality for the staff or its students, yet Naxos prides itself in being the catalyst intellectual stimulation. The first indication that Helga is unhappy is evident in her description of the students’ treatment at the school in Naxos. Female students are supervised by a rigid dean, herded to meals and classes, and monitored closely each day. Students are marched in pairs into the dining hall and are considered unlady-like or ungentlemanly when displaying too much enthusiasm. The voices of students and staff are stifled and most rendered silent against the big “machine-like” operation of the school (Larsen 37). To Helga, Naxos had become a “machine” and a “showplace” in the South which molds students to the “white
man's pattern" and stifles teachers' innovation and individualism (37). From Helga's viewpoint, Naxos, the all-black school that was established to develop the race, actually hindered individual development instead of promoting collective, progressive individuals.

Helga's observation of Naxos results in an unresolved conflict between her ideals and those of the school. Helga is appalled by a visiting white preacher who praises the students because "Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them .... They knew enough to stay in their places [and] when and where to stop" (Larsen 37). The preacher's address to the students includes his suggestion by telling them that it is their [Negroes] duty to be "satisfied in the estate to which they had been called, hewers of wood and drawers of water" (37). The words of the preacher indicate that there is no escape from the flawed philosophy espoused at Naxos, and Helga must decide whether or not she is able to remain employed by an institution that is diametrically opposed to her beliefs. The idea that black students should be satisfied as common laborers angers Helga because she feels that blacks at the school are too accepting and lack the confidence and freedom of speech and thought to enable them to demand a better outcome for their futures after graduation. A more in-depth analysis of the preacher's words and the philosophy of Naxos reveal that blacks are being compared to workers in a factory. The ultimate purpose of the "educational factory," as the renowned white preacher explains to both teachers and students, is to manufacture "Naxos products" that will have a specific use value and exchange value in the division of laborers. The graduates from the black school stand to make a "profit" which will benefit society as a whole (Dawahare 25-26) by using their education to work in their chosen trade to earn an income. The preacher's
words, which speak of great admiration and progress of the race, reinforce the unfortunate reality that blacks, regardless of their level of education or success, must still be satisfied in the “estate to which they had been called” (Larsen 37). Some critics assert that Naxos is an “anagram of ‘Saxon’ and more true of its name than its rhetoric, and this bears some of the responsibility for its expected outcome” (Wall 26). The similarities of “Saxon” to the term Anglo-Saxon (which refers to direct descendants of the English ethnic group from the fifth century A.D. and beyond) is important to note because the Saxons, at times in history, probably thought of themselves as a better group who were powerful and domineering. Thus, the use of Saxon to compare to Naxos shows the irony of white influence at an all-black school.

Helga feels that the students are treated harshly and disciplined excessively. It is important to note here that Helga’s background is completely opposite of the environment where she teaches. Helga, who was born in the slums, was raised in a Dutch home with relatives from the time she was eight years old. Educated in the best schools, Helga’s experience is one of the privileged mulattos. Her work at the school is inferior according to her standards. Thus, she had never “quite achieved the unmistakable Naxos mold, would never achieve it, in spite of much trying. She could neither conform nor be happy in her unconformity” (Larsen 42). Further, Helga reflects that she is not fit for teaching, “even for mere existence” (40). Helga has to admit that she had not been understood by the community but even more, she had not “really wanted to be made over” into the Naxos mold by conforming to ideas in which she had no belief (42). Helga’s disagreement with southern black life, its ideals and constraints, angers her and
propels her into action. Because Helga finds the school non-nurturing for cultural growth, she leaves Naxos disillusioned and cynical.

Losing Footing in the Quicksand

Helga makes the decision to relocate to Harlem to find a place more fitting for her life; yet in Harlem, she faces more internal dissatisfaction and frustration with the world in which she lives. Helga struggles to fit into black culture in Naxos and Harlem, but on a deeper level, she struggles with her identity within both communities. She is very aware of her mixed heritage which is the source of her crisis. Born to a white mother and a black father, Helga Crane’s position in life is slightly different from the typical mulatto. Being raised white, Helga has been afforded many more privileges and opportunities unavailable to other mulattos. She is educated and has enjoyed a life of cultural experiences; however, when Helga tries to live as a black woman, she has problems adjusting to the way of life in Harlem. She does not have friends with whom she can bond or form alliances. The only semblance of family she has is Mrs. Hayes-Rore and Anne Grey who are associates. The two ladies introduce Helga to New York society and their friends who all have similar social interests.

Helga’s move to New York provides a positive environment for her because she begins to form friendships and is involved in various activities. While living in New York, Helga finds herself in the midst of what appears to be a movement of uplift. She is surrounded by Harlem society and friends who are proud to be black. She secures a job as a secretary by day and attends lavish parties and the theatre by night. Initially, she
is free to be herself as long as she does not reveal her true heritage or the race of her parents. Her friend, Mrs. Hayes-Rore “felt that [Helga’s story] dealing as it did with race intermingling and possible adultery, was beyond definite discussion. For among black people as among white people, it is understood that these things are not mentioned and therefore they do not exist” (Larsen 72). Thus Helga, who only seeks to remain accepted by her friends despite her race, begins to escape into the middle class lifestyle of her black friends. She neither has to worry about being out of place or being overdressed. Her style of dress and desire for “smartness, for enjoyment” are fulfilled in Harlem. Harlem “had welcomed her and lulled her into something that was, she was certain, peace and contentment” (Larsen 75). The freedom of expression that she has among blacks makes her life complete. “And she is satisfied, unenvious. For her, Harlem was enough” (Larsen 77).

After living in Harlem for a few months, Helga views the city as a replica of the ideals and philosophies that she is trying to escape. In essence, she discovers that the life that she is running from is the life she is propelled into. She rejects the notion of uplift when mentioned by Anne and her friends and grows tired of the constant mention of the race issue in the country. Helga feels her Harlem friends focus on negative race issues too much rather than on the positive attributes of the race, which would instill black pride in African Americans and result in making the race a stronger group of people. She begins to realize that Harlem does not possess the happiness, kinship, and cultural pride that she desires and provides only a limited view of blackness in as displayed in the words and actions of her friends. The “Harlemites,” who are proud of their black
heritage, begin to adopt white ideals and tastes. They seek the finer things in music, dance, speech, and culture; yet, they do not honestly face the problems associated with people of their race. Some critics note that Larsen’s commentary on Harlem’s “New Negro” was critical of the superficial manner in which blacks lived. In addition, as white New Yorkers became interested in black culture, blacks retreated more towards their heritage, particularly in the areas of traditional music and dance. Helge finds herself embarrassed as she becomes engrossed in the music of the people of the despised race.

The narrator describes this entanglement as such:

For the while, Helga was oblivious of the reek of flesh, smoke, and alcohol, oblivious of the oblivion of other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all. . . . And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn’t, she told herself, a jungle creature. (89-90)

Helga’s perception of the dancing men and women’s actions in Harlem nightclubs as “creatures in jungles” is too much for her, and thus, she decides New York is not the place for her. She seems to feel ashamed of the energetic, animalistic dancing and wanton behavior and attempts to disown what she sees as a negative part of herself. Helga, again, denies a part of herself for the sake of belonging somewhere. Helga cannot stand being “shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of her race. Why, she demanded in fierce
rebellion, should she be yoked to these despised black folk?” (54-55). Helga realizes that she cannot remain in Harlem and searches for a place without the racial boundaries of Naxos and Harlem that she has previously abandoned. She flees to Denmark in order to abandon her Harlem identity completely.

Sinking in the Quicksand

Helga heads to Europe to live with her mother’s sister, Katrina Dahl. Helga feels that Copenhagen holds her “dream of change of life somewhere else; some place where at last she would be permanently satisfied” among approving and admiring people who would appreciate and understand her (Larsen 88). Helga looks forward to reconnecting with her family and leaving behind the race issues in America. She also knows that she will be economically secure. Denmark cranes Helga freedom from her blackness, but she immediately becomes an exotic foreigner who has a “primitive” look which can be attributed not only to her black heritage, but to her colorful and elaborate clothing, lavish jewelry, and silk finery as well. Aunt Katrina and her husband, Fru Dahl, try to capitalize on Helga’s beauty, and she finally recognizes that she is a “doll” on a shelf for display for Copenhagen’s elite who sat “effectively posed” on the sofa being admired by a group of visitors answering questions about America (100). Using Helga as an object was an attempt for her aunt and uncle to raise their status in Danish society. At first, Helga believes that “this was her proper setting” (97), but she soon recognizes that her relatives hope to marry her to a famous artist which was not a part her plan. This alternate environment does not suit Helga’s purpose because the Danes do not understand the meaning of biracial and her experience in a foreign land does nothing to facilitate her
growth as an independent, black woman. Thus, Helga’s move to Copenhagen serves as another hindrance to her self-discovery. She has the option to live as she pleases, yet she cannot escape being defined by others. Although Helga has not defined her identity, she is certain of who she does not want to be defined on her previous experiences. Permitted to move between countries and situations, Helga cannot break free of the constraints faced by being a woman, and especially a black woman. Helga suffers from an accommodating spirit in which she accepts others’ expectations of her, forces herself to live up to these expectations, and then becomes disenchanted. Ironically, Helga’s status as object becomes more apparent in Denmark than in any other place that she lives.

Denmark becomes a source of discomfort rather than a place of comfort for Helga. When Axel Olsen, a famous Danish painter who does not know that she is of mixed heritage proposes to her, she is insulted and rejects his proposal and, perhaps, a life of security in Copenhagen. Furthermore, Axel reveals a painting of Helga that does not represent the way she sees herself, and this event helps her to understand Axel’s real feelings about her. Helga reports, “It wasn’t, she contended, herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features. Herr and Frau Dahl had not exactly liked it either” (Larsen 119). On canvas, Helga’s image is one of an exotic whore, sensual in nature and praised by others who see it. Olsen himself says that, “my picture is, after all, the true Helga Crane” (119). His view of Helga and his treatment of her as an object indicates that Helga’s situation will not improve in Denmark, but is, in fact, only the opposite end of the continuum of her Harlem experience. Instead of finding a place that lies somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, Helga finds that Denmark is another
extreme that defines her identity as “other” rather than accepting her the way she is. When she is defined in terms of physical beauty alone, Helga cannot get in touch with her true inner self which she desperately seeks.

Enveloped in the Quicksand

To further explain Helga’s escape from uncomfortable situations, Helga departs from Copenhagen under the pretense of returning to Harlem to attend Anne Grey’s wedding. In reality, Helga is attempting to escape the social constraints she experiences in Denmark. Upon returning to Harlem, Helga begins to take steps in reclaiming her sexuality after feeling a yearning for Robert Anderson. Thadious Davis notes that when Helga “distinguishes herself as subject from her self as object, she forges action against the grain of her previous passivity . . .” (267). Her meeting with her former supervisor consumed her and “all night, all day, she had mentally prepared herself for the coming consummation, physically, [by] spending hours before the mirror” (Larsen 135). Helga, who at one time rejected Anderson, is now ready to consummate a relationship with a man who is married to her former best friend, Anne. When Anderson refuses Helga’s advances, she finds herself shattered and frustrated so much to the extent that she stumbles into a storefront church and engages in a sexual encounter with the preacher. The current rejection by Anderson, coupled with the freedom that Helga experiences to express herself, along with the religious chants and shouts, become a type of conversion for Helga. Helga’s “impulsive conversion whether real and properly motivated or not, frees her of the inhibitions and anxieties retarding self-expression” (Davis 269). With her “surrender to religious and sexual ecstasy, she no longer attempts to bridge the division
between her emotions, arrested in childhood, and her intellect, matured and analytical (269). Helga’s frustration with isolation and sexual energy drive her into the arms of the seemingly venerable Reverend Pleasant Green. She makes a final attempt to resolve her issue of belonging and identifying with her inner feelings through this relationship. Her submission to the preacher through marriage satisfies her need to belong to someone, something, somewhere.

Helga’s decision to marry Reverend Green commits her to the black race, even if the relationship is forced and insincere. Feeling entrapped, Helga attempts to free herself from the racial confusion she has endured all her of life. Her choice to return to black life gives her hope since that life was “broader, deeper,” and makes “folk kin” (Larsen 122). Helga becomes engrossed in the Southern working class community as a way to escape the racist white gaze and the middle class blacks who make her feel poor and undervalued.

The freedom Helga seeks actually becomes aids in her demise. Helga does not recognize her true feelings and desires even after her marriage to Reverend Green. Her quick courtship and consummation of the marriage leads her to “the tiny Alabama town where he was pastor to a scattered and primitive flock” (146). Newly saved and enlightened, Helga begins to try to make a contribution to the small community, yet she is hampered by multiple pregnancies and an illness that literally claims the birth of freedom that she has fought so hard to attain. Robert Bone, African American literary critic, describes Helga as “a neurotic young woman of mixed parentage, who is unable to make a satisfactory adjustment in either race” (Bone 102). Bone suggests that the
protagonist has faced disappointment after disappointment only to find another situation in which she quickly loses grasp of who she is by living in this small town among those who are unlike her. Helga’s obsession with discovering her identity ultimately results in her becoming enveloped in quicksand. Her quest has led her through a “succession of minor bogs until she is finally engulfed by a quagmire of her own making” (Bone 103).

Helga’s last attempt at living as a black woman comes in her marriage to Reverend Green, yet this union proves to be nothing but a disaster for Helga. In fact, Helga loses much of the individual voice and identity that she has left. In her marriage to Green, Helga begins the relationship confidently by trying to convince the ladies in the congregation to improve their homes and style of dress. She is unsuccessful in this attempt and things go down hill from there. Additionally, after Helga begins to produce one child after another, she becomes trapped, “so there was no time for the pursuit of beauty, or for the uplifting of other harassed and teeming women, or for the instruction of their neglected children” (Larsen 150). Adversely affected by constant pregnancy and childbirth, Helga surrenders all authority to God.

After the birth of her fourth child, Helga takes back her authority from God, but it is too little too late. She is extremely ill, confined to bed, and unable to use her voice: “She hovered for a long time somewhere in that delightful borderland on the edge of unconsciousness, and enchanted blissful place where peace and incredible quiet encompassed her” (155). Helga is too weak to talk or read and the nurse becomes her voice. Helga “... dozed and dreamed in snatches of sleeping and waking, letting time run on. Away” (162). She never gains strength enough to regain her voice.
Helga's inability to use her voice really makes her ineffective. As the novel nears end, Reverend Green has lost interest in Helga and is mainly concerned only with himself. He traps her into the world's definition of womanhood—that of mother and wife. Her creativity is stifled and individuality is lost. Marrying Green for security and stability does not allow Helga to be happy and absorb herself into her surroundings as she did previously. She sadly cannot, "subdue the cleanly scrubbed ugliness of her own surroundings into soft inoffensive beauty" (121). Her life becomes like the title of the novel Quicksand as Helga sinks further away from the life she hopes to have. Left lonely, empty and much like her life as a child, Helga Crane is exasperated and loses her fight for self-actualization even in the process of healing and returning to good health:

Helga had too much time to think. At first she had felt only an astonished anger at the quagmire in which she had engulfed herself. She had ruined her life. Made it impossible ever again to do the things that she wanted, have the things that she loved, mingle with the people she liked. She had, to put it as brutally as anyone could, been a fool. The damnedest kind of a fool. And she had paid for it. Enough. More than enough. (159)

Helga becomes a victim of her own racial and sexual oppression even though she was provided with experiences that most people, especially black people did not have. Lacking an opportunity to receive love from either a mother or a father, Helga never gains her identity. She does not develop an independent voice from any experience in her life. She is not accepted in either the black or white world; whereas, Iola Leroy is accepted as black once she accepts her heritage. The critics' attempts to blame Helga's
wanderings on racial matters are disputed by Arthur P. Davis. According to him, Helga is the victim of her own inability to make the right decisions by contemplating, “One question returned in a slightly new form. Was it worth the risk? Could she take it? Was she able? Though what did it matter now?” (Davis, From the Dark Tower 96) She eventually returns to Alabama (where she has previously lived as a young woman) only to find a world in which she is not suited. A succession of children and poverty make her weak and vulnerable. Finally, her incompatibility with her mate and her community keep her from improving her life. The bright future that Helga once envisioned is buried amidst children, poverty, and community.

After living life as a single woman, a world traveler, and a wife and mother, Helga Crane has nowhere to turn. Tragically, her life has ended. The promise of a new life, new friends, and new possibilities do not materialize. She lacks the courage and independence of Iola. She was never able to neither gain substantial employment nor establish herself in the community as a woman of substance as did Iola. Her status as a married woman did not bring her prestige and completeness as did Iola’s marriage to Dr. Latimer. Helga is never able to stand on her own to establish her voice as an independent woman because she allows others to lead her down paths of indecision, temporary situations, and loveless relationships. According to Lou Ann Crouther, “Larsen’s pointed focus on ‘Living black’ or ‘Living white’ as alternatives in Helga’s world—in Harlem or Denmark—finally is not a very plausible alternative for a protagonist with so few clarifying traits” (145). Much like the mulatto who is uneducated and underprivileged,
Helga, an educated and well-traveled woman, succumbs to the pressure of a realistic world.

The Search for Identity and Voice

The constant shifts in Helga’s life and her search for identity cause her much discontent and keep her in constant struggle with opposing situations. Helga cannot escape the duality of her racial and sexual identities: “Helga resists the thickets of racial and sexual oppression by taking flight” (Williams, *Nella Larsen* 173). Instead of finding comfort and peace in her journey, Helga continuously meets the same polarizing imperatives. Jeffrey Gray states, “If Helga’s travel is doomed to failing it is not because she fails to ‘find herself’ but because she is looking for herself, her essence! In particular she accepts the body and identity generally as given and fails to see its constructed-mess at every stage” (260). Iola recognizes that her geographical location is the answer to changes in her selfhood while Helga believes that a new location with different expectations is her only answer. Larsen forces readers to examine identity in terms of “ethnicity, race, gender, and feeds into a modern movement against essentialism” (Clemmen 446). Helga never finds that place of belonging or comfort as does Iola, and constantly struggles with one extreme or the other. As a black woman in a largely dominant white, male world, Helga cannot see her true self no matter where she lives or what her life is like. Wall asserts:

Helga’s quest for herself is futile. Both *Quicksand* and *Passing* contemplate the inextricability of the racism and sexism which confront
the black woman in her quest for a wholly integrated identity. As they navigate between racial and cultural polarities, Larsen’s protagonists attempt to fashion a sense of self free of both suffocating restrictions of ladyhood and fantasies of the exotic female other. They fail. The tragedy for these mulattoes is the impossibility of self-definition. Larsen’s protagonists assume false identities that ensure social survival but result in psychological suicide. In one way or another, they all “pass”. (Passing for What? 98)

Further, Wall suggests that Larsen’s character in Quicksand has no possible hope for self-definition. Helga, from early in the novel recognizes that “passing” is not worth the price: “Helga decides since she cannot live in both worlds, she must escape to a life of confusion” (109 and 105). Helga’s voice at the beginning of the novel appears clear. She is a black woman who desires to live in the black world. However, by novel’s end, her voice is weak and insignificant.

Helga’s continuous search for her identity and her voice is highlighted throughout the novel. Her repulsion of the males she makes contact with in the novel highlights her perception of self as an object who moves from place to place. She is neither grounded nor secure in one location. As Ann Hostetler has suggested, “Quicksand is mediation on color: gowns of shivering apricot; sunsets of pink and mauve light; the turquoise eyes of fellow travelers . . .” (35). Helga moves “restlessly within that meditation, changing as she moves; Helga is a sort of anti-chameleon, placing herself in settings which will not conceal her but show her to greatest effect” (Gray 265). Just as one would drape a piece
of furniture for various effects, Helga drapes herself against the "backdrops of Naxos, New York, Copenhagen, and Alabama" (265). She exists only in these locations as a figure on display for others to admire and be amused by, yet she is incited by the attention and admiration. While Helga enjoys the benefits that she receives as a mulatto, she does not want to blend into one race or the other. In the instances where she blends into the environment or feels she is being forced into blending, she breaks away either by uprooting herself or through marriage. Helga’s world is not determined by her, but by the surroundings in which she lives. Alice Walker suggests that Helga seeks to break the cycle of treatment that existed since slave times. In other words, Helga wants to halt her treatment as an object in one culture and stand as an independent woman of her choice in any environment. Helga knows that sex before marriage and even within marriage will pose further limitations to which she will not succumb (Saunders 23).

In order to understand this limitation, readers should reflect on the experiences that Helga had with males at Naxos. The school is headed by Anderson. Even though discipline is managed by a stern woman, the female staff and students are restricted by rules which stifle their dress and opinions. In addition, Dr. Anderson supports the very controlled environment and is not willing to allow Helga to make her decision to leave on her own. He suggests reasons she should stay at the school. Further, her relationship with James Vayle is not a particularly an emotional relationship. Rather, it is a relationship of necessity for Vayle as indicated by Helga’s hope to love him later if they were to eventually marry. Helga manages to escape both unemotional and loveless relationships by fleeing uncomfortable situations.
Hazel V. Carby explores the theme of Helga’s alienation from her environment. According to Carby, Larsen places Helga on the inside and the outside of racial, sexual, and class perspectives. This alienation from her environment that Helga experiences is defined by Carby as one that thinks that alienation can be eliminated by another state of consciousness (169). A woman like Helga feels that if she changes venues, she can find the ideal environment because her belief is that if she can change locations, she can change the mindset that she holds. Larsen’s use of a woman without established home helps create the stage for Carby’s interpretation of an alienated woman. In addition to Carby’s definition, I also offer the notion that Helga’s alienation is self-imposed through both a physical and mental hindrance in her search. Instead, Helga believes that a change in location and social relations will eliminate her mental stress.

Further contributing to Helga’s alienation in black and white societies is her knowledge that she is black and will not be widely accepted in society at large. This is a concern because she is unsure that any of her suitors will accept her. Her relationships with Vayle, Anderson, and Olson reduce her chances to fit neatly into either white or black societies. James Vayle’s moral character and family values will not allow Helga to “belong” in his world. Outside of her outward appearance, she does not belong in Olson’s world. Thus, Helga’s experiences in relationships supports Carby’s notion of alienation that one relationship or another, black or white, does not change her stance in life. Instead, her rejection of self and rejection by others force her into an unplanned and unexpected marriage with Reverend Green.
Viewed as a beautiful woman by all who come in contact with her (men were particularly intrigued by her beauty), Helga’s lack of personal identity does not assist her in building relationships with one specific type of male. Although they are attracted to her physical beauty, she remains aloof and does not feel mutual attraction. Helga’s disconnect with James Vayle, Robert Anderson, and Axel Olson signals a rejection of self. Helga had an adverse physiological reaction too when thinking of Vayle, and “acute nausea rose in her as she recalled the slight quivering of his lips sometimes when her hands had unexpectedly touched his; the throbbing vein in his forehead” (Larsen 58). Helga’s perception of Vayle is that of a pathetic man who was too weak to stand up for his own beliefs. He, in Iola’s opinion, was too entrenched with the Naxos philosophy and afraid to resist the status quo which she opposed. He, in turn, became another reason for Helga to leave the school. Likewise, Helga is not attracted to Robert Anderson for the same reason. Although educated and intelligent, Anderson only recognizes Helga’s beauty instead of acknowledging her feelings about Naxos. Similar to Anderson, Olsen offends Helga with a portrait of her by revealing a sensual, brightly decorated woman on canvas. Enraged, Helga leaves Denmark thinking of her lack of attraction to Olsen. Upon departure she recalls her disapproval of Axel Olsen’s physique, “the shape of his head, the mop of his hair, the line of his nose, the tones of his voice, the nervous grace of his long fingers” (115). Helga eventually marries Reverend Pleasant Green, but she notices his dirty finger nails, his fat unwashed body, and the odor of his sweat. After having four children with him, Helga looks “in helpless dismay and sick disgust at the disorder around her,” and she observes the “little dab of amber humanity which she had
contributed to a despised race” (151). Her final assessment of the Reverend Pleasant Green is that “revulsion had come upon her; that she hated this man” (156). Resigned that her children would have to grow up in this repulsive environment, Helga once again feels trapped and oppressed to the point where nothing Green says or does complements her or helps her find her true identity.

Larsen’s Legacy

Helga, for many readers and writers, becomes an example of a woman on a quest for self that becomes contemporary and timeless. Larsen, as an author, struggled to be accepted at time when interest in black writers waned, and she found herself writing novels with characters who could pass as white. In the forward to The Complete Works of Nella Larsen, novelist and non-fiction writer Marita Golden recalls how her reading of Larsen as a college undergraduate allowed her to “intellectualize the bleak portrait of female identity Larsen so deftly painted” (viii). These writers, she recalls, also made her relate to the character of Helga Crane on some levels. Though spirited, Larsen’s characters were restless and “hampered by the failure of imagination of those around them as by their own weakness” (ix). They could see themselves whole, but could not make themselves that way. Published as the Harlem Renaissance came to an end, Quicksand was a novel written ahead of its time. Larsen’s character Helga provides an alternative view of African American women’s writing of the Harlem Renaissance. Helga, unlike her immediate successor, Janie Crawford, functions outside of the black culture which is central to Hurston’s and others’ work. Quicksand deserves serious
consideration not only as a "bold and innovative novel about race and gender, but also as a searching metaphor for the experiences of being African American trapped by narrow definitions of race, caught in cultural transition, and alienated from the traditional anchors of family or ethnic tradition" (Hostetler 45).

DuBois also praised Larsen's work and portrayal of Helga as the "best piece of fiction that a Negro American has produced since the heyday of Chestnut, and stands easily with Jessie Faucett's There Is Confusion in its subtle comprehension of the curious cross currents that swirl about the black American" (Davis, Nella Larsen 280). Likewise, Alain Locke praised Larsen's work for its ability to "render contemporary issues in a fresh perspective" (281). Larsen's works provided readers with situations that mirrored much of the lives of African American women of the 1900s. Larsen herself faced some hardships in life as did her character, Helga Crane.

Larsen was writing at a time when women were not given their proper places in the literacy ranks. "Helga Crane was the most fully realized and convincing black woman depicted in American fiction to date" (Larsen xiv). Charles Larson, in his introduction to the Complete Works of Nella Larsen, states that Helga's story is "a portrait of loneliness and pain, despair and sorrow" (xiv). These qualities, he states, bind Larsen's character to the "heroines of any number of works by black women writers: Zora Neal Hurston, Ann Petry, Toni Morrison, Gray Jones, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor" (xiv). The heroines in the above-mentioned works are seen as precursors to late feminist writers. Saunders contends, "This explains why so few could understand Larsen
in her own lifetime (she died in 1964)” (15). Quite obviously, Helga’s neurotic behavior was not appealing to a male-dominated literary world of the Harlem Renaissance.

Through her portrayal of Helga Crane, Nella Larsen typified a character who exercises her freedom in a broader world than Iola; yet, she does not grow to become a full being in control of her life. Whether or not Larsen intended for the character of Helga Crane to represent one whose true identity is not defined by her but by those around her is unknown, but interpretations of Helga strongly reveal a woman different than ones in literature before this time. Larsen, as author, seems to suggest that the female character of the late 1890s and early 1900s has an inner struggle that cannot be resolved. I offer that this struggle with identity for the African American female in literature may not be resolved until well into the next era. At least, this idea is suggested by the portrayal of Janie Crawford, in Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God.
NOTES

1. Robert Bone, some years later, deems Helga "a neurotic young woman of mixed parentage, who is unable to make a satisfactory adjustment in either race" (Saunders 15). Thus critics in the mid 1900s viewed Helga as a lonely, unhappy young woman who ironically serves as a model for later female characters in the works of Hurston, Petry, and Walker. The character of Janie Crawford, Lutie Johnson, and Celie all display qualities of Helga Crane from the pre-modernistic feminist works. Charles Larson, whose introduction is referred to in the Saunders work, seems to feel that despite the problems that Helga encounters in Nella Larsen's novel, she is exemplary enough to warrant credit for future characters. I agree with Larson that Helga Crane does have her place in literary history and the advancement of black female characters. However, I believe that Frances E. W. Harper's Iola Leroy in the so named novel, is the prototype for later female characters such as Helga Crane and later Janie Crawford.

2. Wall further notes that Larsen's other protagonist in Passing also passes for white but does not succeed in "winning the game." In addition, as early as 1973, Hortense Thornton suggests that "when one considers the complex events of the novel, it becomes possible to argue that Helga's tragedy was perhaps more a result of sexism than of racism" (qtd in Saunders 14). He challenges readers to question whether Helga is the example of the extreme difficulties that an open-minded, independent woman would face in her journey to self-discovery in a male dominated world.

3. To provide a historical context for the Harlem in which Helga lives, Alain Locke's The New Negro glamorizes the Negro who primarily holds middle class values
related to educational and artistic pursuits. The New Negro as defined by Locke by “his artistic endowment and cultural contributions” (qtd. in Shearer 15). These qualities are ones that society used as a measure of common identity for black people in the early 1900s.

4. In Laura Baker Shearer’s thesis entitled, “Identity in ‘Quicksand’: Helga Crane’s struggle with the New Negro,” the author examines Helga Crane’s search for identity in light of Alain Locke’s definition of the New Negro. She contends that the concept of the New Negro is what confuses and restricts Helga especially when she moves to Harlem. In Harlem, Helga becomes repulsed by the overly emphasized white middle class values that are displayed among the middle class blacks she befriends.

5. Helga does not realize that this utopian lifestyle that she now leads is exactly what she becomes critical about later in the novel. This lifestyle also is the New Negro as defined by Locke and aspired to by many during the Harlem Renaissance.

6. There was a profound disparity between the artistic movement and the poverty that grew in Harlem. Henry Louis Gates notes that James Weldon Johnson and his contemporaries believed the “images of Harlem they fantasized and perpetuated.” They wanted “to create this Harlem through evocation of the word, the word which precedes the image.” Gates suspects that Johnson and his contemporaries were not even aware of the economic hardships that constituted the Harlem slums (Gates 44 and 58).

7. It is here that Larsen’s protagonist realizes that she feels a part of the dancing and music, but she refuses to let herself be free to feel the true spirit of her African heritage. In true Harlem fashion, the animalistic rhythm, sweat, and smells of the people
remind Helga of a lower class of people, perhaps those she has always tried to avoid identifying with in her earlier life. This scene in the novel places Helga’s identity in a place outside of her immediate surroundings. Identity for Helga then is not where she lives, but what lies within her.

8. This treatment that Walker refers to and that Helga actually experiences is the mistreatment of women for pleasure and as objects, which occurred to many slave women, particularly mulattos.
CHAPTER 4
THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS AND THE POWER OF SELF IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

The previous chapters of this study analyze the black, female protagonists in Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*. Iola's journey to self-actualization is unique when compared to those of other female characters of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Harper and Larsen, novelists ahead of their time, set the tone for the newly formed and confident female character that emerges later in the twentieth century. Harper's depiction of a female character, who overcomes great obstacles including slavery and the discovery of mixed blood, rises above the female characters in black women's literature who were representative of the status quo. Her character, Iola, becomes the model for the progressive, female character in black literature until the appearance of Larsen's Helga Crane and other female characters during the Harlem Renaissance. Helga Crane depicts the black female character who goes on an exploration in an attempt to take control of her life, but she fails and falls short of self-actualization. Helga's appearance on the literary front shows an evolution of the tragic female character whose life does not bring her the satisfaction that she deserves and desires. It is not until the emergence of the bold and daring female character in novels written by Zora Neale Hurston in the early twentieth century that moves the black
female character ahead in literature. Hurston’s mulatto character, Janie Crawford, becomes the successor of Harper’s Iola Leroy and Larsen’s Helga Crane. Each of the three female characters is a young woman who develops over a period of time into a woman who depends on her inner strength to face various adverse experiences during the journey of self-discovery. However, Hurston extends the development of Janie’s character beyond the family and societal influences of Iola and Helga. Her character, Janie, evolves into a more self-actualized woman due to intense soul searching and personal growth that begins during Janie’s younger years.

Harlem Renaissance writer, Zora Neale Hurston, emerged as a literary force in the late nineteenth century with her short stories, essays, and the quintessential novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which was first published in 1937. Written at a time when Hurston was highly regarded as an author, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* tells of a young woman’s journey from innocence to womanhood. In this novel, Hurston expands female characterization beyond Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* as well as the works of other black, female writers between the late 1800s and early 1900s. Her approach to the depiction of female sexuality and feminism is more honestly treated than in the works of Fauset, Harper, or Larsen. Hurston, unlike other authors and women of the 1930s, was described as flamboyant, outgoing, and uninhibited. She defied many of the stoic values of the black middle class that had impacted previous authors to become a successful writer in her own right.

Hurston’s view of black women in literature drastically took on a new form with the characters of Janie and Nanny. In the novel, Hurston treats subjects such as the rape
of Janie’s mother and grandmother (Rape was a common occurrence for black women of the nineteenth century.) as a shameful, traumatic experience that had negative implications for the future of all black women. She also exposes the sexual and spiritual feelings of women in relationships which, before the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, was treated superficially and not as an important aspect of the black, female character. In contrast to Hurston’s Janie, who is daring and adventurous, women in literature were generally submissive, manipulative, or acquiescent. Thus, the view of black women in literature drastically took on a new form with the work of Hurston. Unlike Iola Leroy, who was ashamed, at least at first, of her mixed heritage and had to overcome the feelings of abandonment, Janie seems not to be hindered by her mother’s seedy past and abandonment. Instead, Janie embraces her mixed heritage and is determined to be different from other mulattos. Unlike Helga, who becomes objectified by her family, friends, and particularly men in her life, Janie rebels against the traditional relationships between men and women in order to claim her independence.

Mrs. Janie Crawford Killicks Starks Woods

Set in the all black town of Eatonville, Florida, Their Eyes Were Watching God, tells of a woman’s struggle for self-respect and selfhood that takes her through three marriages. The protagonist, Janie Crawford, is a complex and multidimensional character who is a contrast to previous invisible and passive female characters in literature. Like Iola, Janie must overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles including an inner struggle for independence. Born to a mother who was raped by a white school
teacher, Janie is a woman who defies the odds and triumphs as a self-proclaimed woman by the novel’s end. She is raised by her grandmother, Nanny, after being abandoned by her mother who preferred to live life as a single, free-spirited woman. Nanny’s wish for Janie is that the young girl has a life that is different from the one she and Janie’s mother, Leafy, lived. Janie defies all odds by living a life that she feels that she deserves, despite the disapproval of others, and finds a type of success that was uncharacteristic of other black, female characters in novels of nineteenth and early twentieth century created in works such as Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892), and Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928). Janie struggles to understand self-empowerment after breaking away from anyone trying to dominate her including her grandmother, whites, uncaring men, and other women in her life. Janie searches for and finds a sense of autonomy to satisfy her longings in life. Hurston uses Janie’s relationships and three marriages to narrate her road to self discovery as she leaves Eatonville and returns later as a mature, independent woman who is able to articulate her desires after years of searching for the “horizon,” a term that is used throughout the novel as a symbol of her personal quest for identity (Hurston 9).

Janie’s quest for identity is one that has motivated and influenced her life since an early age. Early in the novel, Janie questions her looks as a young girl. As she chronicles her life, she shares that she was reared with white children all of her life, and did not know that she was not white until the age of six. Janie says, “Wouldn’t have found it out then, but a man come long takin’ pictures and without askin’ anybody, Shelby, dat was de oldest boy, he told him to take us” (21). She continues reminiscing
and reveals that when the pictures returned she looked for herself, and did recognize that she was the “real dark little girl with long hair.” From this experience, Janie discovers, “Aw, aw! Ah’m colored!” (21). Janie’s experience with the photograph is similar to that of Iola who also discovers that she is black when her uncle reveals this information. Once Janie realizes that she is a dark child rather than white like her playmates, she begins to develop self-pride that evolves throughout the novel. Before the revelation of her skin color, Janie believes that she is like everyone else. Janie then endures teasing from her classmates and becomes known as “Alphabet” because so many people had given her different names. Her teacher, Ms. Washburn says, “Dat’s you, Alphabet, don’t you know yo’ ownself?” (21). Because Janie did not know her father and had a distant relationship with her mother, her roots were grounded in the former plantation life and the children with whom she played daily. Therefore, the message from childhood is clear—Janie’s identity is unknown, her voice is defined by others’ descriptions of her, yet she yearns to know her true self. Only when Janie defines who she is, does she become fully free as a young woman.

Janie’s first relationship finds her in a state of yearning for affection, and the novel begins with her daydreaming under a pear tree at the age of sixteen. Her curiosity awakens when she sees a bee fertilizing the blossoms of the tree:

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 . . . . She has been
summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless, sweet that left her limp and languid. (24)

Janie imagines what it would be like to be in love and the object of such affection. This is an important juncture in Janie’s young life. As Kimberly Rae Connor explains, “This spiritual-natural vision comes to represent the vision Janie searches for throughout her life as she reaches for the horizon. In a sense, this vision is her moment of awakening to the possibility of conversion, when she becomes aware of the kind of life she wants to lead” (Connor 146). Furthermore Connor asserts, “The conversion experience . . . for Janie is key in empowerment of the self” and will ultimately become her journey into self-hood as the novel progresses (3).³ Janie experiences this conversion on two levels. First, she seeks to define herself as an individual in her own world. Janie’s awakening becomes her discovery of self which develops from personal experiences and contact within the broader community. Janie becomes free from the binding traditions that society and her grandmother have placed upon her through her day-to-day life and relationships with others. At the same time, Janie makes the more natural conversion from a girl to a woman who recognizes her sexuality.⁴ The vision of the pear tree blossoming represents Janie’s idea of a natural union with another; therefore, this scene serves to bind the beginning of Janie’s journey to selfhood to the end of the journey when she returns to Eatonville a new creature.

This pear tree scene represents Janie’s early response to the maturation process and becomes the thread that binds the major scenes in the novel. She feels herself come alive and yearns for attention. Once her internal transformation occurs, Janie can no
longer think like a little girl; instead, she thinks of love and longs to reach the “horizon.” Although she does not fully understand the symbolism of the bees’ pollination, Janie, like most young girls, is curious to discover how this natural phenomenon is applicable to her life. Thus, Janie begins to make this journey to the “horizon” a reality by exploring the possibilities with a boy named Johnny Taylor. The romantic concept of love that Janie feels at age sixteen does nothing to help her with the fulfillment she desires.

“Da Mule uh da World”

Nanny, Janie’s guardian after her mother’s rape and eventual abandonment, quickly decides Janie’s fate upon learning of her infatuation with Johnny Taylor when she forces her granddaughter into a loveless marriage to a man with land and a home. Nanny hopes to alleviate the plight that she and Janie’s mother endured in life. Nanny, a former slave, is a traditional woman who believes that marriage for Janie will provide protection and security. (This is an important event in the novel since Janie does not find this sense of security until she later meets and marries Tea Cake). In Nanny’s eyes, the only “safe” way for Janie to live her life is through marriage to a man described in the novel as “middle-aged,” but characterized as “stable” by her grandmother.” Nanny’s former life as a slave robbed her of living as a free woman in both a figurative and literal sense.

Figuratively, Nanny cannot explore her own life because she possesses the physical and emotional scars of bondage from her days as a slave. She is especially protective of Janie for two reasons: first, Nanny was not afforded the opportunity to
marry during the days of slavery; and secondly, Leafy's (Janie's mother) dreams were violently taken away when she was raped. In Cheryl A. Wall's view, Nanny "envisions Janie on the pedestal reserved for southern white women, far above the drudgery that has characterized Nanny's own life. . ." (Wall 1075). Nanny cannot fully identify with anyone except the white southern woman employer that she imitates. Nanny believes that Janie is just as deserving, if not more deserving, of a decent life because of Nanny's suffering and hardships. Michael Cooke stated that "her [Nanny's] only hope of ending the cycle of 'mulehood' was through her granddaughter, Janie" (Cooke 36).

Although she is a free woman when readers meet her in the novel, it is evident that Nanny has not overcome the mentality of slavery. Her arrangement for Janie creates a situation of bondage similar to that associated with slavery. Nanny's idea of "whut a woman ought to be" is rooted in historical barriers (Hurston 31). She remembers the harshness of slavery and has emerged as a survivor; yet, she cannot release the past and live in the present. Holding onto the emotional baggage and wearing the scars of her past causes Nanny to view the ideal of true happiness as a fantasy, particularly for young Janie. Nanny's vision for Janie's future is that of a fairy tale or storybook life somewhat like that of Cinderella where a beautiful young girl meets a handsome young prince, the two marry, and live happily ever after. Nanny envisions Janie in a union that provides a home and security for her granddaughter. Janie, not wanting to disappoint her grandmother acquiesces, marries Logan Killicks, and becomes a good wife. Her role as a dutiful wife renders Janie silent. Nanny's "ideal" marriage forces Janie to become a meek
and submissive woman without an identity or voice of her own. This male-dominated marriage subjects Janie to serving and making others happy despite her desires.

This experience for Janie can be broadened to include the wider experience for women of the nineteenth century. Like Janie in her marriage, women were given no latitude or freedoms to become individuals. They were forced to maintain the servile-like roles to their husbands and commit to a life of subservience. Likewise, Nanny’s vision echoes her view that “colored folks” are more like “branches without roots that make things come around in queer ways” (31) Her words reflect perhaps the views of the novel’s author. Hurston believed that color was not a factor to hinder progress or success of blacks in a white society (Hurston, Dust Tracks on a Road, 172).

While Nanny vows that her granddaughter will enjoy the happiness she herself has never known, the marriage to a “knight in shining armor” will render Janie as helpless as her grandmother. Nanny tries to force upon Janie her condition of being what Hurston calls “tragically colored.” This condition or gendered silence is perpetuated further when Janie’s grandmother explains to Janie that she was unable to marry and have the security and protection she desired, yet she desires the best for Janie and says:

Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high, but they wasn’t no pulpit for me. Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms, so Ah said Ah’d take a broom and a cook-pot and throw up a highway through de wilderness for her. She would expound what Ah felt.... Ah been waitin’ a long time, Janie, but nothin’ Ah been through
ain't too much if you just take a stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed.

(Hurston, *Their Eyes* 32)

The sermon or "text," according to Hubbard, is "the cultural genealogy of black America in general and the black woman in particular" (Hubbard 103). Hubbard further explains that Nanny’s experience explains the history of the enslaved woman in America who has never had the freedom to develop and live as a woman. Nanny clearly expresses her intention to help Janie develop into a solid, moral young woman who will live a life that is less oppressed and more respectable than the life she lived. Although an ideal life did not present itself to Nanny, it is her firm desire to see Janie ultimately fulfill the unrealized dreams she held for herself and her estranged daughter. Janie, not feeling at all encouraged, reflects on Nanny’s decision:

Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon-for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you-and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter’s neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love. (138)

The noose around Janie’s neck gives her no hope of finding her true love. Despite her experiences of sexual exploitation during slavery, Nanny is a woman who possesses high morals and values for herself, her daughter, and her granddaughter. Nanny’s experiences are not necessarily positive for her, and certainly not for Janie, as Claudia Tate points out, "Her experience compels her to believe that male sexual privilege and female biological vulnerability doubly threaten her granddaughter" (Tate, *Domestic Allegories*, 73). Janie
sees it from a different perspective, and desires more freedom. Nanny is insistent on believing that there is a difference between “whut a woman oughta be and to do” (31) and “disavows Janie’s text of desire by insisting that she marry Logan Killicks” (Tate, Domestic Allegories 73).

According to Ronald Hubbard, Janie’s interpretation of Nanny’s sermon prompts her to break free of the “gendered silence and inferior status” (103) of women based on history’s strict guidelines for slaves and women. She refuses to be a “passive on looker” who lets life pass her by. Instead, Janie wants to explore the possibilities that life may hold for her. In “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” Hurston notes that “I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a low-down dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it” (qtd. in Awkward 24). Janie, too, views her possibilities of life in a more positive way rather than allowing previous incidents or experiences of others to hinder her hopes and dreams. Similar to Iola in Harper’s novel, Janie yearns to see life beyond an “inferior status” for women and black women in particular. She discovers that, “to change one’s way of thinking, the individual must change her perceptions of the world” (Hubbard 103). As a young girl, Janie senses that Nanny’s old way of thinking is outdated and that if her life is to be different, she must envision change for herself. While Nanny and Janie essentially share the same belief of getting more out of life, Janie’s route of getting there is different. Janie is not allowed to travel her own road early in her life; instead, she becomes a vehicle on the road that her grandmother has planned for her.
As Darwin Turner writes, Nanny "fails to allow for Janie's personality and aspirations" (106); instead, she tries to live vicariously through Janie. Nanny essentially usurps Janie's right to fall in love by forcing her to marry Logan Killicks who is an old man compared to a sixteen-year-old Janie. Nanny urges Janie not to worry about loving her first husband initially but to be happy that she had protection and a place to call home. Nanny pleads with Janie, "Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie, Ah'm a cracked plate" (Hurston 37). At this point, Janie is painfully aware that the arrangement is a form of enslavement and confinement, but also she desires to respect and obey her elder. Janie's true opinion and feelings are trapped inside of her and prevent her seeking love on her terms.

By forcing Janie into a marriage, Nanny removes the entire vision Janie has created for herself and stifles her voice which is needed for her own growth and development. For Janie, love and desire were the epitome of her life. Once she narrows her world to accommodate Nanny's vision, she is deprived of her dream to explore love and all the possibilities it offers. Sadly, Nanny fails to realize that stripping Janie of her vision of ideal love sets up a sense of uncertainty and a pattern of fruitless searching for love in her life. She counsels Janie on the system of slavery and the negative ramifications. Nanny says, "Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out . . . So de white man throw down de load . . ." Nanny goes on to explain that "de nigger woman is the mule uh de world" (29).

This metaphor of the mule has become universal in the representation of the black female condition and history. Many times this reference is used to refer to the slave or
mulatto who historically has been the subject or object of the master’s whim, but in the novel the metaphor applies to the treatment that Janie receives from her husband after a short time in the emotionless arrangement that Nanny calls marriage. Thus, the metaphor of the black woman and the mule is appropriate when Janie’s first husband attempts to turn her into a mule. He explores the possibility of purchasing an additional mule, “. . . Ah needs two mules dis yeah. . . . Ah aims to run two plows, and dis man Ah’m talkin’ ‘bout is got uh mule all gentled up so even uh woman kin handle ‘im” (Hurston 46). Logan envisions Janie performing manual labor; however, Janie’s vision of being a dutiful wife is shattered after hearing these words, and she is forced to search her soul for her real purpose in the marriage. At this moment, Janie becomes a woman without a voice and thus without an identity or a purpose. Consequently, the mule is used throughout the novel to symbolize the grim reality of black women as “the work animals of society and . . . can have no true self-consciousness, no hope for autonomy or community” (Williams 1086). The mule metaphor also reinforces the notion of women as objects in society. As objects, women do not have a language of their own, and they fail to form an identity. Dependent on her husband and silenced, Janie is forced to cook, clean, and submit to Logan’s demands without any reward. He is verbally abusive and criticizes her upbringing and independence. Despite Janie’s attempts to rationalize with her husband to receive better treatment, he still treats her like a mule.

During her early years of marriage to Logan, Janie neither recognizes that she is restricted and is slowly losing the opportunity to become the young woman of her childhood dreams, nor does she quite understand the dynamics of a marital relationship.
She knows that she does not love Logan and she is not physically attracted to him.

Janie's vision of marriage consisting of blooming pear trees and bees pollinating in nature slowly dissipates the longer that she remains married to Logan, yet she yearns to have love that mirrors that image that remains vivid in her memory. The recurring metaphors throughout the novel of the pear tree and the horizon are representative of Janie's ideal life and union with another. The metaphor of the pear tree, referenced earlier in this chapter, serves as a reminder of the physical change and awakening in Janie's quest for womanhood. Like the pear tree, Janie is ripe and ready for this encounter; yet, the horizon holds more promise for Janie at this time in her life than the pear tree. According to Kimberly Rae Connor in Conversions and Visions in the Writings of African American Women, the horizon represents the individual experiences one must acquire to achieve selfhood . . . (146). More specifically, the horizon for Janie represents her discovery of the voice that will result from her quest towards personal growth and freedom that she gains from the various experiences throughout her life. Thus, the marriage to Logan is just one such experience that will help her reach the horizon. This early relationship serves as one of the steps of many to realizing that the horizon is not an outward quest for her identity; rather, it is a search for internal satisfaction. At this point in the novel, it is too early for Janie to realize that the outward search for love and happiness is the wrong route to reach the horizon, for it is neither in the outerworld nor through others that she will achieve that desired state. She does not identify with the matriarchal roles of wifehood; instead, she must create her own world or her own life independent of what others dictate for her. In order to do this, Janie must
seek that place of spirituality within herself despite what the community wants or what her heritage requires (Connor 146).

A key part to Janie’s search for the horizon is connected to her vision of the natural process of love. Although the metaphor of the pear tree does not fully become actualized until later in the novel, the vision of nature creating new life is appealing to Janie and represents the naturalness and acceptance of her own sexuality. Thus, when Logan is not sexually appealing to Janie, she equates that with failure of the dream. The traditional notion—that as long as sex is satisfying to a man, it is acceptable for a woman—is implied by Nanny’s explanations of marriage and the men in Janie’s life.

Nanny’s vision for Janie, strips Janie of any power or control over her own happiness and self-fulfillment as a woman, (Lester 81-82). Janie’s quest for the “horizon” is similar to Iola Leroy’s quest for her own identity outside of race. It is a quest that comes in a long line of self-determining black women who must invent their own worlds rather than waiting for the world around them to be made to fit them. Janie’s quest takes her through a life that appears tumultuous and tragic to anyone looking in from the outside, but her quest actually proves to be a precursor to other black characters in African American female novels to the extent that the theme of identity becomes a common one in the novels written by women.

Voiceless and Nameless

Janie’s voice serves as the predecessor to many black female characters in literature after the early 1900s. Janie’s character represents, to some extent, the inner
souls of literary characters and actual black women and their desire to seek security as well as fulfillment in their lives. Thus, Janie’s self-fulfillment is not derived from her relationships with her husbands or with the people in the communities in which she lives. Instead, Janie gains a sense of security from the depth of her inner strength. Annye L. Refoe explains that through Janie’s character, Hurston “accurately forecasts a different woman—a new woman—who would be free to take time to learn about herself and subsequently add depth and meaning to her interpersonal relationships . . .” (30). Janie experiences the power of relationships through her multiple marriages. Janie’s first marriage to Logan Killicks, a man twice her age, finds her yearning for affection. Her second marriage to Joe Starks, a mature businessman, brings her security, yet she is silent and passive. Finally, Janie’s third marriage to a younger, fun-loving man, Virgible Woods also known as Tea Cake, serves as the catalyst for the voice she eventually finds. Her personal journey becomes her voice because her experiences with spousal abuse and neglect allow her to return to Eatonville as the woman that she desires to be throughout her life. When Janie returns to her hometown at the end of the novel, she tells her story to her best friend, Phoeby and all in the community who will listen. Janie’s voice at the end of the novel not only signifies her recognition of her new-found freedom, but serves as a model for all black women who seek to take ownership of their lives. Janie’s quest for self-actualization is not just her own, but one that is echoed in the black, female characters of other African American authors.

While Nanny’s intentions for Janie are good, her views of marrying a man in order to have a secure future are outdated, and they displease Janie who is dissatisfied
with a marriage to an old man whom she does not love. Janie, who is just as determined as her mother and grandmother, realizes that she must “invent” herself (Connor 146). Thus, she makes up her mind to leave Logan, and soon finds her way out of marriage to Logan Killicks when she meets and elopes with Joe Starks. Literally leaving one front porch to sit on another porch, Janie envisions that she can become a “bee in bloom” (54) and not a “vision...desecrating the pear tree” (28) as Logan Killicks did to her. Her new union with Joe Starks, who she fondly calls Jody, is a conscious decision and choice that Janie makes. She envisions her future life with Joe as the fulfillment of her dream; however, Janie does not experience emancipation in the second marriage any more than she did in the first.

Janie’s marriage to Joe provides security, yet she remains silent and passive. Joe Starks is introduced as a fine, well-dressed businessman with much drive and ambition. He takes Janie to the all black town of Eatonville, controls her life, makes her tie up her hair, and monitors her relationships with others in the town. Although her marriage to Jody provides the security that Nanny wished for, Janie’s life is like an imprisonment which is marked by male dominance and restrictive activity. Joe forbids Janie to mingle or speak with others in the community and makes her the mayor’s dutiful wife. The town’s people question the nature of the relationship between Joe and Janie and how the two get along with each other in the store that he owns and in situations around town. Janie complains about Jody’s frequent absence from home: “You’se always off talkin’ and fixin’ things, and I guess I feels lak Ah’m jis’markin’time” (74): Janie is a battered
woman who is verbally abused because Joe chastises her for any of the small mistakes she makes in the store.

When Janie is asked to address the town, Joe immediately responds by saying, "Thank yuh fuh yo’ compliments, u mah wife don’t know nothin’bout no speech makin’...She’s uh woman and her place is in de home" (69). Janie is a woman who is talkative, and with his reprimand, Jody stifles Janie’s voice, strips Janie of a part of her identity, and reduces her to nothing more than a housewife and store attendant who waits on him hand and foot. Joe’s silencing of Janie is the same as the silencing that Logan and Nanny force upon Janie earlier in her life. While Joe strips Janie of her independence, she fights desperately to make him realize that their marriage is strained and unnatural according to what marriage should be. The narrator describes Janie’s emotions, “A feeling of coldness and fear took hold of her. She felt far away from things and lonely” (74). She is lost and cannot recognize the splendor of the horizon in this relationship either, and as a result, she cannot find her voice amid the prison that Joe creates.

Janie looks for a voice, yet her inexperience with love leaves her longing for fulfillment despite her marriages. Wendy J. McCredie states very accurately that Their Eyes Were Watching God is a story of “Janie’s struggle to articulate, to approximate her own voice and through her voice, herself” (25). Without a voice to speak for her, Janie is rendered helpless in her attempt to shape her life and is powerless in finding the love that she desires. Hurston’s use of language signifies that there is power in words. Hurston implies that without language, fieldworkers, slaves, or other oppressed people during the workday, are objects waiting to be exploited. Janie is like the workers in the fields during
the day—mere objects, without their own voice. Yet in the evening, when the “sun and bossman are gone . . . the skins felt powerful and human” (Hurston 10). After a long days’ work, the workers are free to talk to each other about anything without remaining silent and oppressed. In fact, “they become lords of sounds and lesser things” (Hurston 10). Later, when the workers can talk among themselves, they assume mastery over themselves and acquire power over their circumstances. Similarly, Janie’s inability to speak for herself allows Nanny and her two husbands to overpower her and make decisions that control her life. Like other oppressed people in Hurston’s novel, Janie’s oppression will continue until she gains her own voice.

Once again, Janie finds herself in a relationship that thrives on daily ridicule and demeaning comments in her marriage to Joe. He criticizes her about her age as she becomes a middle-aged woman. Jody no longer views his wife as the “young pullet” he once knew. Instead, he believes that she should conduct herself as a much older woman. Sometimes he refers to her as “stupid” and “inferior.” In short, “Jody declares psychological warfare against his wife and taunts her relentlessly” (Karanja 58). To Janie, the spirit of her second marriage leaves the bedroom and takes “to living in the parlor” (Hurston 111). In other words, Janie’s marriage has lost the luster and passion that was once in the bedroom. With Joe, Janie has “no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be” (112). Janie’s sexual desires for Joe no longer exist and her feelings of love are gone. Janie knows that her “ideal” marriage is no longer ideal. She is much older and things
that once sparkled in her eyes no longer appeal to her. Jody eventually dies and Janie once again sets out to find true love and happiness within her.

Janie becomes a woman who begins to understand herself, her desires, and values during her marriage to Joe. Now a widow, Janie is the object of suitors who are interested in her as a woman and her material possessions. Janie did not find the “horizon” with Joe, and, prior to his death, she experiences the same “mulehood” mentality with him that she did with her first husband, Logan. Janie’s search for happiness is like Iola’s search for her parents. Iola cannot be at peace within herself until she reconnects with her family, and Janie cannot be comfortable with whom she is until she gains her voice and confidence in herself. According to Maria Tai Wolff, “Life may be a “revelation,” but it is the acceptance or interpretation of the revelation which is important” (31). Janie ‘s acceptance of this revelation comes when she “knows that another’s ideas are never adequate. The only truths she will now accept are those derived from her own experience” (31). Janie reflects, “These men didn’t represent a thing she wanted to know about” (Hurston 139). Like Helga in Quicksand, the relationships she forms with others in her household and within the community are unfulfilling. Janie recognizes that the relationships between her and her two husbands are inadequate in helping her reach the “horizon,” that independent state where she desperately sheds her unfulfilled desires. At this point in her life, Janie’s only route to reaching the “horizon” must be the ultimate truth that she possesses. This state of being is independent of her relationship with someone else, and separate from another’s opinion of her. Janie’s life must now be based upon her own voice and desires. She can no longer listen to those
around her or allow others to make decisions for her; she must speak up and hear her own voice unlike earlier in her life.

Important to the discussion of Janie’s establishment of voice are the names given to her by her husbands and the names of the husbands themselves. In “Naming and Power” in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Sigrid King discusses the significance of names in the African American community and in the novel. The act of naming gives one identity (whether negative or positive) within a community and as an individual (683). Cooke notes, “To have a name is to have a means of locating, extending, and preserving oneself in the human community, so as to be able to answer the question, ‘Who?’ with reference to ancestry, current status, and particular bearing with reference to the full panoply of time” (qtd. in King 683). However, names do not dictate qualities or personal characteristics, as is evident with Janie in *Their Eyes*. Hortense Spillers argues that Janie’s name, for Hurston, represents a woman’s life that had not been “circumscribed and prescribed by precondition” (253). According to Spillers, Janie’s name gives her an identifiable status, rather than placing a limit on her life’s experiences. Her experiences early in life identify her with someone other than herself. For example, Janie is associated with the white family, the Washburns (the family who her grandmother worked for), and called Alphabet (by all who knew her while at the Washburns with her grandmother) in her early years; and thus, she has no real identity or association with her own family. Just as Janie lives her life according to the desires of those whom she loves or are supposed to love her (mainly Nanny and her husbands), she also accepts the names and labels given to her by others. Early in her life she fails to
recognize herself as a black girl and struggles to live a life defined for her by others throughout her womanhood. In essence, Janie does not have an identity separate from her association with others. Elizabeth Meese refers to Janie as an object without a name or color (61-62). Her nameless status early in the novel contradicts the well-defined Janie who emerges later in the novel. Since the more mature Janie does not need a surname as a component of her identity, she finds self satisfaction with or without a last name.

Janie’s lack of identity and absence of a real name during her marriages to Logan and Joe force her to become someone other than an independent woman with her own means of living and social status. Logan’s reference to Janie as working like a mule is Hurston’s way of paralleling Logan to a master with Janie as his subordinate. Janie also refers to Logan as Mister Killicks which suggests that she views him as her master. Logan calls Janie Lil Bit signaling Janie’s lack of power and control of her life and marriage. He intends to dominate her and literally make her work like a mule both inside and outside of the home. Although Janie accepts this identity of “mule” early in the marriage, she quickly recognizes that her relationship is not her idea of love or marriage, yet she leaves this relationship without any clear direction and enters into another “nameless” union with Joe Starks.

In Janie’s union with Joe, she again assumes another silent or inferior role. At their first meeting, Joe Starks introduces himself using his full name and place of origin, “Joe Starks is the name from in and through Georgy” (Hurston 47). Joe speaks with power and authority, which Janie is unable to do. Gloria Cronin credits this self-
confidence to his “capitalistic pursuits” and “wealth.” His name, therefore, represents a man with a big voice which makes him appear powerful, but he is devoid of substance. He, too, diminishes Janie’s power as a woman and silences her by naming her “lil girl-chile” and “pretty doll-baby” (48-49). Names such as these are an indication of the role that Joe expects Janie to play in the marriage, especially once he becomes mayor of Eatonville (119). Joe quickly assumes the role as master not long after becoming mayor. His use of the term “I god” (for “my God”) is reference to himself and “Mrs. Mayor Starks” (85) makes it clear that he wants power and control over Janie and others in the town. After Joe gives Janie pet names and titles, Janie becomes silent again in a marriage she thought was the “blossoming pear tree.” The death of Jody prompts Janie to follow her own judgment and look towards a more rewarding, spiritual fulfillment in her life.

The Awakening

As the new widow of Joe Starks, Janie begins a new life with the voice of freedom. Initially, she takes her hair out of the scarf she has worn in public since her marriage to Joe, to symbolize the release of old restrictions which had been thrust upon her. Although Janie observes the routine rituals of mourning, the act of removing the scarf symbolizes Janie’s new freedom from bondage. As the wife of Mayor Starks, Janie is restricted to Joe’s rules and demands. He does not allow her to wear flowing hair while working in the store. Instead, she must wear a head rag so that her hair is not visible to store customers. The mayor makes it emphatically known that she is his
trophylke like figure and that he is the only one who should enjoy her beauty. The narrator describes the incident that prompts Joe to make this decision:

One night he had caught Walter standing behind Janie and brushing the back of his hand back and forth across the loose end of her braid ever so lightly so as to enjoy the feel of it without Janie knowing what he was doing . . . He felt like rushing forth with the meat knife and chopping off the offending hand. That night he ordered Janie to tie up her hair around the store . . . She was there for him to look at, not others. (87)

Therefore, the action of removing the scarf is Janie’s release of her free-spirited self that she had to hide when she was married to Joe.

Janie gains a new strength and identity from within that she never experiences with her two previous husbands. Janie’s life has been dictated by the relationships with men. Without a spouse for the first time since the age of sixteen, Janie now has an opportunity to “pursue the free spirit that has remained imprisoned for such a long time” (Refoe 34). She reflects:

Years ago, she had told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass. It had been a long time since she had remembered. Perhaps she’d better look. She went over to the dresser and looked hard at her skin and features. The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place . . . She took careful stock of herself, then combed her hair and tied it back up again. Then she starched and ironed her face, forming it into just what people wanted to see. (Hurston 134-5)
Missy Dehn Kubitschek asserts that “Hurston underscores Janie’s rebirth by associating her reflections on her marriages with a creation myth (24). Janie finds a “jewel” within herself and opposes that image to ‘tumbling mudballs’” (Hurston 139). While experiencing a free state of being after Joe’s death, Janie discovers a “jewel” that was embedded deeply within her. This “jewel” is “quiet time” or “meantime.”

According to Iylana Vanzant, noted contemporary lecturer and author, the “meantime” that Janie discovers is a time in a woman’s life when a relationship ends and true life begins. In this meantime, women have “earthshattering, heartbreaking experiences” that help them define the state before love comes along (Vanzant 13). Vanzant calls this experience as meeting the “false needs” of women. In particular, “false needs” refers to those needs that may be physical or merely functional as opposed to ones that reach the soul or inner needs of women. Vanzant states that the key to eliminating false needs and addressing genuine feelings is to clean or eliminate the “stuff” that “keeps [you] from a true and honest experience of love” (17). Vanzant concludes that once the “meantime” experiences are over, women evolve as whole beings ready for the ideal love relationship.

Specifically, Janie’s past experiences have placed her in a transitional state, a state in which she is free to listen to her inner voice and become comfortable with herself. During this transitional state or meantime, Janie has the opportunity to “grow and grow some more” (18). She can leave behind the comforts of being in a relationship with a man and work self-improvement in order to experience the love that she desires. Unlike Iola, Janie does not seek her family, particularly her mother, for self-definition. The new freedom that Janie feels away from the “mis-love” forced upon her by Nanny is golden as
affirmed in the novel: “She had found a jewel down inside herself and she had wanted to walk where people could see her and gleam it around” (Hurston 138). She dodges suitors who come into the store looking to woo her and states, “Ah jus’ loves dis freedom” (143). Janie stands her ground with her friend Phoeby and others in the town who perceive that she is not sorry about Joe’s death. Ann duCille believes that Hurston’s character is freer than most women of her time because she escapes some of the brainwashing of women that begins in childhood and replaces that with her own convictions of womanhood. She is free because she is a woman with monetary means after Joe’s death, and she is a woman with no attachments such as a husband and children (qtd. in Refoe 147).

Janie’s newfound freedom allows her to reflect on the past and to renew her spirit for the future. Relationships with Nanny and her two husbands force Janie to take a long look at herself and evaluate her life. Her actions and feelings have been largely controlled by others and Janie has had little opportunity to live as she wants as her own woman. According to Kimberly Rae Connor, Janie must “creatively reinterpret and re-present this story to escape its constraints and preserve its empowering aspects in order to create her own” (157). Janie is forced to “measure her success or failure by the goal of self-actualization” (157). She must commit herself to hard work, become aware of herself, and accept herself “for all and everything that she is and all that she can possibly become” (Vanzant 17). Yet, she has to discard her old beliefs of love, marriage and dependency as it relates to relationships. In order to become a self-actualized woman, Janie must feel for herself and recognize her own spirituality to evolve as a woman.
Furthermore, Janie’s quest or journey toward self-actualization can be defined in terms of psychoanalyst Abraham Maslow’s highest step in the hierarchy of needs. According to Maslow, the step of self-actualization is based upon “one’s desire to reach full potential” (Weiten 489) which is reaching the highest state of self-worth. People who are self-actualized are “healthy, happy people who work toward continuous growth” (Weiten 489). They seek rewarding relationships with others and have a clear view of reality. Self-actualized individuals do not seek approval of others; rather they live life to the fullest relying only on their own inner strength. Further, Maslow outlines key components to developing a healthy personality. Some of those components include “spontaneity, simplicity, and naturalness; autonomy, independence of culture and environment; strong friendship and balance between polarities in personality” (Weiten 490). While Janie does not possess all of the qualities of self-actualization according to Maslow at this stage in her life, the possibility of becoming a self-actualized individual is within reach if she can move beyond the restrictive conditions that have previously existed with her grandmother and two husbands. Thus, this “quiet time” (the time that lapsed between the end of Janie’s marriage to Jody and the beginning of her relationship with Tea Cake) is the catalyst that moves Janie closer to becoming the self-actualized woman that evolves by the novel’s end.

Janie realizes that life is not confined to her two unfulfilling marriages. In fact, her community defines marriage as a deterrent to a “woman’s achieving self-authority” (Tate 3). Tate further explains that a woman’s desires are “short-changed by restrictions rather than nourished to full maturity” (73). Janie has not developed to her full potential
because her entire life has been controlled by Nanny or someone else, and she has not been afforded the opportunity to think, act, or live as her own person. Now that she is a free woman in terms of living her life without adult supervision or a male companion, Janie has the opportunity to redefine her life. In order to reach the "horizon," Janie must first set herself free from the conventions that previously defined her life. As a part of this self-healing process, Janie must forgive Nanny for her insistence to seek security rather than love in her first marriage. She must forgive Logan for treating her like a mule, and she must forgive Jody for using her as a sort of trophy for his mantle. Most importantly, Janie must forgive herself for living through the many years of pain and suffering at the will of others. She must search deep within for the strength to overcome her past and finally recognize the voice that she possesses as her own. Thus, her will and determination propel her to keep reaching for the potential to develop as an independent woman who can enjoy life as she dreams it to be.

Janie's third relationship is one that puts readers in doubt as to whether the relationship with Tea Cake is the "real thing" or "the one" that will cause her to experience the blossoming pear tree. By all appearances Vergible Woods, also known as "Tea Cake" is the "man of the new age—the ideal of most women" (Refoe 35). He is described as caring, sensitive, friendly, and supportive—which are all of the characteristics that make Janie appreciate him and realize the difference he will make in her life. Their first encounter at the store was a pleasant one—without the formalities that would allude to social status. Tea Cake greets Janie appropriately, but is not too forward like the other suitors at the store. He does not exhibit the pretentiousness of Joe
Starks or the stoicism of Logan Killlicks. Janie does not initially know Tea Cake’s name, but she immediately recognizes him as a relaxed and kind man. When Janie finally learns his name is Vergible Woods or Tea Cake, she asks, “So you sweet as all dat?” (Hurston 149). Janie makes fun of Tea Cake and his name. She is able to freely ask him about his name and laughs at his response; she would not have been able to act in this manner in either of her first two marriages. At the same time, Janie’s question reflects her surprise at meeting a man who appears to be fun. Tea Cake does not seek to dominate Janie as her two former husbands do; instead, Tea Cake, the name and the man, appear to be more interested in forming a bond with her.

To illustrate that those names, titles, and status are not important to either Tea Cake or Janie, the two spend their time participating in fun, leisure activities. Tea Cake teaches Janie how to play checkers and places no boundaries or expectations on her. He does not admonish her for things that she says or does. Janie is free to be herself as stated by the narrator, “He set it up and began to show her and she found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play . . . . She looked him over and got little thrills from every one of his good points” (Hurston 146). The “play” that begins between Janie and Tea Cake is symbolic of the courtship that develops between the two; the simple game of checkers is just the beginning of Janie and Tea Cake’s budding relationship. He later introduces Janie to digging for bait, learning to drive, going to dances, and picking colors of clothing that flatter her. For Janie, Tea Cake represents the relationship she has been searching for all of her life: “He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in spring.
He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God” (Hurston 161). This vivid description is pleasant and idyllic in nature just as Janie’s vision of pollinating bees underneath the pear tree. Tea Cake was her dream—her “blossoming pear tree.” Barbara Johnson comments that Tea Cake “succeeds in fulfilling Janie’s dream of a ‘bee for her blossom’” (161).

Annye L. Refoe assesses Janie’s new beau as “the symbol of the new man who can accept the strength of a woman to exhaust her potential; who can see his mate as a partner and not merely a possession” (36). According to some Hurston scholars, Tea Cake fits the description of the model mate for the modern woman. Women of the modern age (1990s and 2000s) seek a mate who is comparable to them and accept them as an equal and for who they are. Tea Cake is the catalyst needed for Janie to “reinforce her vision of herself.” Tea Cake brings out the best in Janie. In his company, she is able to laugh, have fun, and live. He encourages her to do all the things that she may have dreamed of previously in her life. He, in turn, is transformed into a more formidable man through Janie’s poise. Prior to meeting Janie, Tea Cake is not viewed as a model mate for any woman because he had never settled down, had a wife, or provided for a family. Janie brings stability to Tea Cake’s life, but she is initially hesitant about having a relationship with him and ponders, “He looked too young for her . . . Then again he didn’t look like he had too much . . . He was probably the kind of man who used to live with various women but never married” (Hurston 152). Hezekiah, the store manager, tells Janie that Tea Cake is not the marrying type unless it is to a woman who is not used to much in a man, in other words, a woman who does not expect a man who is self-
sufficient and able to take care of himself and his wife. Hezekiah warns Janie that she must be mindful of his motives, yet Janie ignores his unsolicited advice and wants to get acquainted with Tea Cake. The townspeople even convince Phoeby that she must “drop uh lil hint here and dere” so that Janie would be alert in case Tea Cake is trying to rob her (168). Phoeby’s efforts are in vain as Janie informs her that she aims to live her life as her own. Previously, Janie would not have been capable of making such a strong decision. Her firm stance indicates her personal growth towards an independent state she so desperately desires.

To further demonstrate her progress towards independence, Janie decides to marry Tea Cake and the two eventually leave Eatonville amid the whispers of gossip among the townspeople. Janie and Tea Cake travel from job to job and eventually settle in the Everglades joining other seasonal workers on the muck. Here Janie becomes a part of the community and an equal partner to Tea Cake. She is an “integral, vocal member of this community” (Boyd 302). She is free to explore her likes and dislikes in this relationship. Janie and Tea Cake laugh and play and work during the day and come home later to prepare dinner together. Their house becomes the center of activity in the community. The workers gather after work to tell stories, sing, and play cards (unlike her previous oppressive experiences in which she is forbidden to speak her mind and make decisions for herself). As illustrated in the novel, “The men held big arguments here like they used to do on the store porch. Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself . . .” (Hurston 200). In Tea Cake, Janie sees the man ideal man to form the relationship she has been
searching for all of her life. Janie is able to use the past hurts in her life to help her
clarify the ways these experiences have changed her. In retrospect, Logan and Jody
defined Janie's life by making her work when they wanted her to work and making her
dress and behave the way they wanted. That type of life proved unproductive for Janie,
and from them she has learned her preference for personal choice. Armed with this
knowledge, Janie is able to exercise power and control over her life.

Thus, Janie's third relationship (with Tea Cake) serves as the catalyst for the
voice that she has at the end of the novel. Janie's new freedom in her relationship with
Tea Cake teaches her confidence and self-appreciation. On the muck, she decides that
the household and wifely duties that she will perform for Tea Cake also makes her happy
and will give her peace. Janie is able to ignore the voice of the community in pursuit of
the "horizon." Together, the two create a loving relationship based upon mutual respect,
common expectations, and shared duties. Annye L. Refoe notes that, "Historically,
women have been trained to and rewarded for putting others first" (37). In this instance,
Janie is able to align her needs with those of Tea Cake rather than putting his needs first.
The relationship with Tea Cake shows Janie, for the first time in the novel, act
completely autonomously. Prior to her new self-discovery, Janie does not act as an
independent being. Instead, she sacrifices her will in favor of others' wishes. At this
point in the novel, Janie has gained a new love of self and is able to move in a positive
direction on her journey.

Janie faces two obstacles that threaten her relationship with Tea Cake, yet affirms
her progress towards reaching the horizon. One incident occurs after Janie discovers Tea
Cake frolicking with a young girl, Nunkie, in the fields during the work day, and the other is when Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog. The encounter between Tea Cake and Nunkie hurts Janie, and she tells him, “You done hurt mah heart, now you come wid uh lie tuh bruise mah ears! Turn go mah hands” (Hurston 205). Janie first swings at Nunkie in an attempt to hit her, and then she does the same to Tea Cake. When Nunkie escapes Janie’s wrath, she hits Tea Cake and from there the two battle vigorously throughout the house. The two wrestle until they are finally engrossed in each others passion.

Described by some critics as violent, others see the disagreement as normal between loving partners. The fight between Janie and Tea Cake, according to Susan Meisenhelder, “poses no threat to Janie and Tea Cake’s relationship” because the two fight and reconcile as equals (68). This union is similar to Janie’s bee that “sinks into the sanctum of a bloom; and “the thousand sister-calyzes arch to meet the love embrace” (Hurston 24). It is sweet, idyllic, and pleasurable which indicates that the relationship is progressive and good for Janie because she faces Tea Cake in an assertive manner, whereas in her marriage to Joe Starks she cowered in silence. By taking a conscious stance against the man in her life, Janie is able to summon her power from within. This moment lets Janie step out of her comfort zone into a more daring position. In this position, she is able to explore her own happiness and know the feeling of sharing emotional and physical love with her partner. In essence, Janie’s horizon becomes more attainable in her relationship with Tea Cake.

The second incident that threatens Janie and Tea Cake’s relationship is the hurricane that devastates their happy home and marriage.22 Valerie Boyd suggests that
the storm is symbolic of the doom of Janie and Tea Cake's marriage (Boyd 304). The impending destruction of the hurricane foreshadows a possible crumbling relationship.23 When the storm first approaches and the workers pack their belongings and prepare to leave the muck, Tea Cake and Janie opt to stay put in their quarters. They watch the "monster roll in his bed" and confirm that "Ole Massa is dcin' His work now..." (Hurston 235). The two begin to discuss dying when Tea Cake asks Janie her feelings about leaving her house and the possibility of dying in the storm. She answers, "We been together round two years. If you kin see de light at daybreak, you don't keer if you die at dusk. It's so many people never seen de light at all. Ah wuz fumblin' round and God opened de door" (236). The reference to "fumbling in the dark" can be interpreted as Janie's search for the "horizon" all of her life and is inclusive of her two previous marriages. The open door is symbolic of the new attitude that Janie has adopted with Tea Cake because a door has been opened for Janie to become an independent and free thinking adult woman. She experiences a releasing of adrenaline which helps her energize and take a new direction for her life. The references to the master's work and dying indicate that Janie and Tea Cake look towards God for assurance, clarification, and understanding since "they seemed to be staring at the dark but their eyes were watching God" waiting for a change to come about in the storm (236).24 The previous reference to God as the "boss" or "Old Massa" points to the duality of the use of God in the novel. Gary Wilentz in “Defeating the False God: Janie’s Self-Determination in Zora Neal Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God” in Faith of a (Woman) Writer, provides one
interpretation of God. Wilentz believes that Janie sets out to defeat the false god(s) present in the novel.

Rather than look for the false god(s) that she has previously worshipped, Janie “fights her way out of the constricting comments of the dominant culture” (Wilentz 285). Each step along the way finds Janie turning away from her oppressive environment and finding herself. In Nanny, Janie rejects materialism. In Logan, she rejects dominance. In Jody, she rejects the white middle class values in the all black town of Eatonville, and eventually, Janie rejects Mrs. Turner’s light-skinned features and superior attitude towards dark skinned people. Consequently, each time Janie rejects something or someone associated with the dominant culture, she moves a step closer to a situation that is ideal. Janie’s rejection of external values and ideas are parallel to Iola in the novel, *Iola Leroy* when Iola also rejects her white middle-class upbringing in favor of her black heritage. Iola decides against passing for white and insists on living and working among her people when many light-skinned blacks with her ethnic make-up would have chosen a different path in life. Both Iola and Janie have visions of living as free women who dictate the terms of their lives.

It is interesting to note that Hurston’s duality of believing in the Christian God among black culture is revealed by the characters in the novel during the hurricane in the Everglades. “The time was past for asking the white folk what to look for outside that door. Six eyes were questioning God” (Hurston 235). Why would God bring such horror and destruction to Janie and Tea Cake? Hadn’t they lived a righteous life? Did they deserve this when they had worked so hard to make a living? These questions
remain unanswered in the novel; however, allusions to a higher power signal that Janie and the others share the spiritual foundation that black communities did during the days of slavery and beyond. Here the meaning of the title possibly relates to the spiritual God which protects and provides for those that believe. Janie and the others seek reassurance that they will survive the hurricane and their lives will return to normal. Therefore, when Tea Cake is bitten by the rabid dog during the hurricane, Janie and the others initially look to God for answers, but ultimately begin to question God’s intentions. Janie questions:

Was He noticing what was going on around here? He must because He knew everything. Did He mean to do this thing to Tea Cake and her? It wasn’t anything she could fight. She could only ache and wait. Maybe it was some big tease and when He saw it had gone far enough He’d give her a sign. She looked hard for something up there to move for a sign. She does not receive a sign and Tea Cake dies soon because “God would do less than He had in His heart. (264)

The author’s inclusion of the hurricane and Tea Cake’s death provide an environment in which Janie gains more self-confidence and discovers more of her inner self. Although Janie does not realize the positive impact the hurricane and Tea Cake’s death will have in her life, the two incidents are merely tools for Janie’s self-actualization. Perhaps Hurston uses the hurricane to demonstrate God’s way of moving Janie in a new direction. If the hurricane had not come, would Janie have had the opportunity to change her life or would she have continued to depend upon others to
fulfill her life? Janie attributes Tea Cake’s death to God who she believes guided the entire relationship between the two. Before Tea Cake’s death, he and Janie give credit to God for the good things that have happened in their lives. Janie says, “Ah jus’ know dat God snatched me out de fire through you. And Ah loves yuh and feel glad” (267). As the relationship comes to an end, both Janie and Tea Cake must acknowledge that they have lived, loved, and are responsible for their actions, devoid of white culture. They make the decision to work in the muck. They make the decision to wait out the storm. They make the decision to leave when the storm worsens. Tea Cake makes the decision to try to save Janie from her death, and ultimately, Janie decides that she must kill Tea Cake to save herself because Tea Cake’s unfortunate death is fortunately Janie’s saving grace.

The Horizon

After Tea Cake’s death, Janie’s progress on her journey towards the horizon becomes more evident. Janie must assert herself and make a life changing decision. Now forty, Janie recognizes the difference between love and security. Janie’s previous relationships and the difficulties she faced in those relationships with her first two husbands were out of desperation, but this time Janie’s fight is for her own identity as an independent woman. She finally proves that she is brave and capable of making autonomous decisions that could be the difference between her own life and death. In fact, as she tells Phoeby her story she says that people should stop watching God and find out what “their own lives are about before they go to God” (Wilentz 296). Janie’s exact
words are, “Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh theyselves” (Hurston 285). Janie’s references here to God are in accordance with the traditional black culture’s belief in living a righteous, fulfilled life before going to God. Slavery gave the black community a new religion and a belief in a future life, for slaves learned to look toward heaven to ease their burdens of hardship. This belief by slaves of a God or higher power has led to what some contend is a core belief of the black community. The chief function of the Negro church during slavery was to give blacks hope and a “sense of community.” According to Sara Little, an authority on belief and Christian education, the faith of people in the black community begins with “belief in a God who preserves them through perpetual and undeserved pain and suffering” (qtd. in Cooper-Lewter 5). This belief, a necessary anchor in life’s storm, is that “God takes good care” of those that believe in Him. As one who heals and empowers, God is a factor in the mental and spiritual health of blacks in the black community. Along with Tea Cake’s death and her renewed strength, Janie seems to say that Tea Cake’s life was one well lived and acceptable and that her recognition of self has made her life acceptable in the eyes of God.

The trials and tribulations of life have given Janie strength and a voice that she otherwise might not have gained had she remained in the two previous marriages. Here it is important to note that Janie evolves much like Harper’s Iola Leroy who gains her strength when she discovers her heritage and is able to live comfortably as a black woman. Janie’s true character is not developed until she has the opportunity to develop as an individual without the insistence of Nanny and the rule of Joe Starks.
As a result of this final relationship, Janie’s focus is much clearer than in previous events and relationships in the novel. As she strides into Eatonville, Hurston suggests, “a strong and vigorous woman committed to life and experience despite the death of her lover” (Meisenhelder 78). She looks back over the past with a “philosophical eye,” seeing “her life like a great tree in leaf with things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone” with dawn and doom... in the branches” (Hurston 20). When she relates her story to Phoeby, she admits that she loved and adored Tea Cake; but more importantly, Janie speaks of her individual growth based on her experiences with Tea Cake. She says to Phoeby, “Ah been a delegate to de big ’ssociation of life... Yessuh! De Grand Lodge, de big convention of livin’ is just where Ah been dis year and a half y’all ain’t seen me” (18). Janie no longer has a conflict of the inner and outer self. Instead the two coalesce. Through the love between Janie and Tea Cake, Janie has evolved more open to life and all of the experiences life has to offer.

Janie Crawford in *Eyes* is viewed by many as a descendant of not only Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, but Pauline Hopkins’ Sappho in *Contending Forces*. Janie’s character is shaped in part by Harper’s portrayal of Iola in *Iola Leroy* and Hopkins’s Sappho in *Contending Forces*. She is a young woman living in a southern city after the emancipation of slavery. While Janie does not struggle as do Iola and Sappho with the political and social issues such as racial uplift, education, or slavery, the theme of female identity is present in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as it is in its precursors. Likewise, Janie bears no close semblance to Helga’s sinking situation, but Janie does exercise her options as a free and independent woman. Hurston, like her predecessors, was an
independent woman in her own right, but rather than focus on the intellectual black
coming to the forefront in the 1890s, Hurston’s focus was the “folk culture” of her race.
Criticism from Benjamin Brawley and Richard Wright categorize Hurston as not having
an interest in solving problems of the day and focusing only on the individual rather than
the whole. Wright objects to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by saying that the novel is a
“safe and narrow orvit . . . between laughter and tears” (Larsen xix). To further explain,
critics have made no secret that Hurston was not a favorite of her male counterparts of the
Harlem Renaissance; yet, this did not deter Hurston from being herself. Despite these
negative views of Hurston and her novel, the real essence of the novel lies in Hurston’s
ability to examine the life of a black woman beyond sentimental standards. Rather than
portray Janie just as a dainty, dutiful woman of the sentimental novel, Hurston’s
character values her own thinking and reasoning and is not bound by society’s rules.
Instead, she creates rules of her own in relation to love and relationships.

Janie is the new self-actualized woman in the novels of African American female
writers beyond the 1900s. Writers such as Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*, Toni
Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*, and Gloria Naylor in *The Women of Brewster Place* all built
female protagonists with the mold of Janie in mind. Their characters embody not only
some of the same characteristics and qualities of Janie in *Their Eyes*, but extend the
female character further as an independent woman. She is a woman who has realized her
potential and power as a woman. She is now capable of being in a relationship as a
worthy partner who makes decisions about her life without the urging of others. Her
ability to make decisions is reflected in her return to Eatonville. Janie has two ways in
which to return. On one hand, Janie can return as an ashamed woman who has run off with a younger man, who has been accused of murder, and who has literally been sentenced and hanged by the community. On the other hand, Janie can return home as a woman with pride, who has been exonerated, and who has been to the horizon and back. Janie chooses to return to Eatonville as a liberated individual. Hurston makes the reader aware of the inescapable fact that the community "acts upon Janie and Janie upon the community" (Hubbard 111). Janie differs from her community in that her action indicates her break from "gendered silence" (111). Janie is bold, daring, and nontraditional in her views of the role of women. She is conscious of the outside negative forces, but focused on her inner strength and confidence she has developed through the years of searching for her horizon. The walk home alone is Janie’s all to herself.

Janie’s actions signal a new found freedom much like Iola’s when she is reunited with her mother and brother. While Iola uses her reunion with her family along with the discovery of her black heritage to start a new life of racial equality, she defines herself as a woman with pride and strength. Iola’s new life allows her to represent other blacks and work towards the betterment of her race, while Janie’s new state of being allows her to realize her full potential as a woman and an individual. Thus, Janie “decides what her life will be and the stops she will take to survive” (Refoe 38). The narrator describes Janie’s acceptance of her life:

The day of the gun, and the bloody body, and the courthouse came and commenced to sing a sobbing sigh out of every corner of the room: out of
each and every chair and thing... Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out the window.... He could never be dead until she herself finished feeling and thinking. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of this world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see. (Hurston 286)

Janie symbolically pulling in the fishnet represents the way she has pulled her life together. Once a ship on the great horizon, sailing into the unknown, Janie has pulled into the dock and made her mark on land. The fishnet signals that Janie’s journey is over. This ship-fishnet motif closes the final chapter of Janie’s life where Hurston pulls together the three relationships, the silence, and the self-doubt. It is important to note here that Janie’s actions at the end of the novel affirm her completion of the journey to self-hood, whereas Helga’s actions at the end of the novel leave her sinking into the depths of despair. Thus, Larsen’s protagonist can only be compared to Janie in the courageous battles on the path to womanhood.

Janie’s “timeless search for freedom and wholeness” is a journey that has successfully united personal fulfillment and community. Her final word to Phoeby, her new convert, is “you got to go there tuh know there” (Hurston 285). Janie truly has the experience to prove that her journey to the horizon and back was invaluable. She is able to tell the women of the future like Phoeby and the women of the past like Nanny a story of survival and autonomy.
NOTES

1. See Chapter One (introduction) for identification of Fauset, African American female novelist.

2. Harriet Jacobs’ main character, Linda Brent, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, tells of her enslavement and escape from bondage. Linda Brent marries a white lawyer and bears a son and a daughter only to learn that she is still not respected. Jacobs points out that black women often compromised their dignity for the sake of virtue, yet were still devalued no matter their strengths and abilities. In Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, Harper presents a black woman who was a respectable heroine according to the norms of the time. Iola struggles against the cruel injustices of slavery and beyond, and overcomes the mulatto stereotype by working toward the betterment of black people alongside her black husband. Finally, Helga Crane in Nella Larsen’s, *Quicksand*, neither happy as a black middle class woman or as the wife of Reverend Pleasant Green, travels to Harlem and Copenhagen in hopes of finding true happiness. Larsen, Harper, and Jacobs, show readers that assimilating to societal ideals does nothing but destroy black female characters even though they are free from slavery.

3. Connor explains, early black writings of the nineteenth and twentieth century deal with issues of identity and culture, and they can be read as a conversion experience because they shed new light on the quest for identity. The conversion is a journey into self-hood which may draw upon religious ideas from the broader cultural categories. Some instances of conversion are sudden while others are more gradual such as the one Janie experiences over a number of years.
4. According to Alice Fannin and other authors, Janie's observance of pollination could signal her sexual awakening. "Fannin cites this vision as Janie's "Evelike" recognition of her own individual selfhood, as a separate creation in the garden of the world" (qtd. in Connor 146).

5. Nanny represents the victimized black female who is oppressed in a white-male dominated society because of race and gender. Therefore, Janie must listen to her grandmother's advice, but place it in perspective in order to experience self-liberation.

6. Although Logan is not a handsome young man, he can be considered a part of this fairy tale lifestyle because of his material wealth (i.e., land and house).

7. "Tragically colored" refers to being eternally black without any hope of leading a fulfilling life (Hurston, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing*, 121).

8. The "text" references Nanny as a "preacher" who preaches her "sermon" about the facts of life to Janie. Hubbard's chapter "'Ah said Ah'd Save de Text for You': Recontextualizing the Sermon to Tell (Her) story in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" explains that Hurston's language emphasizes the values of black culture, particularly religion. Thus, Nanny's "text" is her acknowledgment of "spiritual, faith-knowledge" that has sustained her through the years (Hubbard 103-104). Lorraine Bethel describes Janie as a representative (Christ-like figure) of the religious experience that is at the center of Black tradition. "This Infinity of Conscious Pain," Zora Neale Hurston and the "Black Female Literary Tradition" (Bloom 16-17).
9. Here we find Hurston’s indictment of the cult of true womanhood. Nanny’s outdated attitudes are remnants of the Victorian period and are seemingly seen as a noose around Janie’s neck (Kaiser 97-109).

10. Nanny’s limited vision has been noted by critics including Michael Awkward in “The Inaudible Voice” (68); however, Lillie Howard believes that Nanny’s vision is clearer than Janie’s in “Nanny and Janie: Will the Twain Ever Meet?” (407).

11. Meisenholder says that the novel chronicles the struggle between the racial and sexual identities packed into Nanny’s and Janie’s metaphors. Janie has two options: one is to live as the mule or imitation white woman in Nanny’s vision or the other is to live as a vibrant black woman she imagined on her own.

12. The mule metaphor that Nanny uses is also a commentary of race and gender in a world where the white man is ruler. By the end of the novel, this metaphor points out the artificial status and power differences between black men and whites. The metaphor image is part of a larger pattern of the imagery developed in the novel to describe black identity. This image is in contrast to the lives of those characters shaped by a largely white dominated world and are described as mutilated trees (Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God, 26 and 39).

13. Nella Larsen imitates the theme of true womanhood in her novel, Quicksand, but Hurston fully develops her protagonist as a sexually alive and vibrant young woman. Laurie Kaiser in The Black Madonna.

14. Phoeby is an ideal listener who seduces Janie into narrating her story. Phoeby speaks as the true pupil; Janie speaks as the true pedagogue (Gates 184).
15. After Hurston, black female novelists such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Paule Marshall portray women in their writings who seek to affirm themselves. Their characters claim a sense of power similar to that of their predecessors; however, they open up new possibilities for female identity (Connor 497A).

16. The comparison of Joe Starks to a white man can be found in *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick* (Meisenholder 64) and “The Inaudible Voice” (Awkward 15).

17. Two other theories of identity development in individuals can be linked to Erik Erikson’s theory of personality and Joseph Campbell’s steps to the quest. Stage five of Erickson’s personality theory “Identity vs. Confusion” is most closely linked to Janie’s development of self. Erikson’s behavior studies on adolescents’ struggle to form a clear sense of identity can be applied to Janie’s search as a young girl and then as a young woman. Her life involves “working out a stable concept of oneself as a unique individual and embracing an ideology or system of values that provides a sense of direction” (qtd. in Weiten 448-450).

Campbell’s quest for identity, as defined in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* by Joseph Campbell involves the components of answering the call to adventure, crossing the threshold into the unknown, facing various trials, finding the reward, and returning to the community. Janie experiences these steps of the quest over a forty year life span through her relationships with her husbands, and participation in the communities in which she lives.
18. As a part of Janie’s quest, she and Tea Cake “undergo various trials and redefine their lives outside of the social constructs.” They do the unexpected and unordinary things. There is no concept of dominant and subordinate sex roles (Kubitscheneck 25).

19. The question of whether Tea Cake is the ideal mate is divided among critics. Those who agree that he is “ideal” are Bone, Wilentz, Carr, Thornton, Naylor, Mc Credie, and S. Jay Walker. Those with differing opinions include Awkward and Sanders.

20. Additional discussion about Tea Cake’s status as the ideal mate for Janie is divided. After hearing of possible romantic attention towards Janie by Mrs. Turner’s brother, Tea Cake beats Janie in front of neighbors. Some describe the beating as justifiable and an act necessary to prove his manhood. Others classify the beating as typical and expected from a man like Tea Cake and for a woman with Janie’s past history with men. Janie’s reaction is complete silence. Michael Awkward, in “The Inaudible Voice of it All,” categorizes her silence as disapproval of Tea Cake’s actions, but reinforces her means of protest that have been present throughout the novel (39).

21. Janie now participates in traditional masculine roles whereas Tea Cake assists with traditional female roles (i.e., cooking). The reversed roles indicate the harmony desired from Janie’s vision idealized early in the novel.

22. Valerie Boyd notes that Tea Cake’s behavior is incongruous by some accounts because he slaps Janie around a bit to show her who is boss. Boyd also parallels the breakdown in the marriage to Hurston’s own relationship breakdown when the man she loved hit her.
23. Only Janie and Tea Cake appear as “undiminished human beings” as described by Alice Walker. Their relationship cannot flourish in a “world of hierarchy and domination” (Meisenholder 64). See also other discussions of the storm’s significance in “Should Their Eyes Have Been Watching God: Hurston’s Use of Religious Experience and Gothic Horror” (Curren 17-25); “Projecting Gender: Personification in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston” (Thompson 737-763); “Zora Neale Hurston’s Poetics of Embalmment: Articulating the Rage of Black Women and Narrative Self-Defense” (Davies 147-59).

24. Kathleen Davies suggests that using the title of the novel emphasizes that it is God Janie and Tea Cake are up against (147-59).

25. The false gods in which Wilentz refers to are Nanny, Logan, Joe, and the townspeople of Eatonville. It is in these persons that Janie has placed her trust only to find herself dominated and oppressed.

26. According to Wilentz, “The title and the word ‘God’ incorporates a double, yet contradictory meaning: There is the God to whom we look for answers and pray for help and there is the other god, the cruel, false god who definitely needs watching” (286).

27. Janie’s talk with Phoeby at the end of her journey and after the loss of her husband is a kind of healing process that aids in her survival. Her words trace her roots from innocence to maturity (Peters 148).
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The African American female characters have developed from nurturing, submissive mammie-like figures into women who are independent, educated, and self-sufficient. Readers of African American literature will not only notice the transition of the black, female character and notice the themes of identity and voice that is prevalent in the works and in the lives of the protagonists in *Iola Leroy*, *Quicksand*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but they should also notice the impact that these three novels has had on the body of literature for nearly a century. Readers should also recognize the fact that these writings are extremely important in the development of the literary female character and were integral in shaping the female movement which later became black feminism or womanism. Although Iola Leroy, Helga Crane, and Janie Crawford were similar in many ways, the uniqueness of each character showed the progression and evolution of the black, female character in literary works. Figure 1 shows the comparison of the characters.

Thematic Connections among the Works

The connection between the three literary works analyzed in this study rests on the common themes of identity and voice. The framework used in the discussion of female characters in the novels written by African American women is based upon the female quest for identity.
Thus, the novels discussed can be considered to be a type of epistemology which provides a framework for “meaning making that recognizes the integration of knowledge construction and identity formation” (McMillian 80). Collectively, the three novels, *Iola Leroy*, *Quicksand*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, help to uncover the individual process of female development which leads to the state of self-actualization through the characters Iola, Helga, and Janie, respectively. This search for self-knowing becomes an active process rather than something “static and neutral” (80). This active state of knowing depends on the use of one’s own life experiences or stories which are used to
make meaning of new experiences. Using a narrative genre, Harper, Larsen, and Hurston describe three women who embarked on three unique journeys in an attempt to seek self-acceptance and fulfillment. Although each character's journey was defined by (or confined to) the time period in which the novel was written, all of the women progress through similar phases that include answering the call to adventure, crossing the threshold into the unknown, facing various trials, finding the reward, and returning to the community. The issue of identity and voice for the African American female was one of concern for blacks in general, and particularly for women who had been portrayed in novels as less than feminine, less than favorable, and less than human.

The work of Frances E. W. Harper began the journey of self-fulfillment for the African American female protagonist. Her novel, Iola Leroy, chronicles Iola's search for self and demonstrates that a free, educated mulatto who was turned into a slave can find happiness and purpose in life. Iola's quest for selfhood caused the literary world to notice that not all black women were victims of circumstance. Iola's search takes her on a personal journey to find her family, but in the process she discovers her self worth. This revelation suggests that finding one's identity can be accomplished through internal and external influences as she gains strength from those around her. Iola's journey is aided by her family and close friends, and with familial support, she is able to gain pride in her heritage and in herself.

Harper's character of Iola was written during a time when the strict Victorian morals governed writings. Women were pledged to an official "cult of womanhood" defined by purity, submissiveness, and domestication. Harper's attack to this largely
white belief was to write what she called a “black Madonna” character to compete with
the ideal and negate the stereotypes developed during slavery (Kaiser 97). Harper’s
success with Iola Leroy began the repair and reshaping of the definition of black
womanhood. Not only did Harper’s writings advocate for the betterment of women, but
her life’s work was an example to her beliefs that black women deserved to be educated
and employable in the same jobs in which white women found employment. Harper’s
progressive views of blacks and women expressed in the character of Iola Leroy were
emulated to some extent in the next generation of novels.

Drawing on the success of Harper and her character Iola Leroy, Harlem
Renaissance writer, Nella Larsen, entered the literary canon with her protagonist, Helga
Crane, who searches for contentment among the black community, the white community,
and within. Helga Crane struggles to overcome the racial and sexual oppression that
many women faced in the days after slavery and Reconstruction. Having more choices
regarding housing, employment, and relationships than Iola, Helga seeks to express her
freedom of choice and sexuality in a multitude of settings through interactions that are
seemingly ideal, but sacrifices her self and self-worth in the process. Although she fails
to define who she is as an individual, Helga confirms that a black woman in society faces
oppression from many sources and must have unique qualities to cope and become her
own person in the midst of these challenges.

Nella Larsen creates a female character who finds herself without the strict
constraints of women of the Victorian era, but who grapples with the dilemma of her
black ancestry. Charles Larson, in his introduction to Iola Leroy, suggests that Iola is
different from other tragic mulatto characters because of her “depth of characterization” (xvi). More specifically, Larsen’s character delved much deeper into the psychological and sexual constraints faced by mulatto protagonists. Helga has options available to her, but continually struggles still with the concept of forming her identity in the midst of assimilating with the dominant culture. Her migrant status foreshadows the theme of flight for the mulatto and leaves readers with a sense of emptiness and longing for resolution in Helga’s confused life. Larsen’s character attempts to define true womanhood through her physical beauty, fine clothing, and lavish furnishings, but falls short by allowing her marriage to crush her vibrant personality.

Finally, Zora Neale Hurston, whose protagonist is not bound by physical, sexual, or other constraints, provides the best prototype of the well-rounded black woman who discovers her identity through her personal quest. Janie Crawford is a woman who tries to live her life in an attempt to please her grandmother, but follows her desire to find love in relationships and within herself. Janie is a complex yet realistic character. While Janie’s relationships with men silence her voice, she is “inwardly constructing new narratives—new knowledge—as her perceptions change” (McMillian 86). Hurston’s character is one who openly displays her strengths and weaknesses as well as her frustrations and happiness as she emerges as the most self-actualized model for the African American female in the modern novel. Janie defies the restrictions placed upon her through her relationships with others and relies solely on her own power and will. As Maxine Greene explains, the quest for identity should “enable persons to become as persons, developing in networks or relationships, seeking their freedom, finding their
voices, looking through the perspectives opened . . .” (McMillian 84). Janie’s quest is guided by her relationships with others and with her surrounding community. Larsen’s character of Helga is bound by the conventions of society whereas Zora Neale Hurston’s Janie finds a way to move beyond conventions. Unlike Janie and Iola, Helga Crane has more options available to her by her ability to live in both worlds.

Hurston’s central character in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* avoids many of the traps that Helga falls victim to in *Quicksand*. Janie avoids the child-bearing and rearing phase by bearing no children to Starks or Tea Cake. Janie envisions her life as an idyllic, unlike Helga who ends up suffocating in her own life of motherhood and illness. Unlike Iola Leroy, who was ashamed of her mixed heritage and had to overcome the feelings of abandonment, Janie seems not to be hindered by her mother’s past and abandonment. Instead, Janie embraces her heritage and sets her mind to be different from the rest. Hurston’s development of Janie presents the strongest example of the identity theme in the novels of the early 1900s and spurs the beginning of more history making on the part of female authors and characters into modern times.

Historical Importance: Shaping the Canon—Past, Present, and Future

The works of literature analyzed in this study were a catalyst for the development of a genre of writing that comprised a canon of African American female writers. What began as a need to refute the portrayal of black women in Victorian literature became the beginning of a new era of female writings. The early works are extremely important to the African American female canon because they help frame the context of the plight of this new literary character by tracing historical aspects of women that impacted the
writings of Harper, Larsen, and Hurston who are in this analysis. If we were to trace the history of the African American female writer and character beyond the 1930s and Zora Neale Hurston’s works, we would find that women writers were still not accepted into the traditional literary canon as late as the 1970s, even though they had written novels, short stories, and poetry which impacted readers as early as the 1800s. Nina Byam notes, in her essay “Melodramas of Beset Manhood,” that the “American literary canon did not include any women novelists” (123). The idea that women were relegated to the home was observed in all aspects of women’s lives—the home, business, and education. Byam further states that “the theories controlling our reading of American literature … led to the exclusion of women authors from the canon” (123). However, the progression of the early, female character perhaps was best verbalized and portrayed by two prominent female authors, Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston’s article, “How It feels to be Colored Me,” and Alice Walker’s “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” perhaps, sum up the need for writings about black women. Short literary pieces such as those written by Hurston and Walker justify the need for female writings that address identity crisis of the African American protagonist. Hurston’s article articulates the possibilities, imperfections, and self-acceptance of a black woman in post-Reconstruction times. Hurston states:

I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul nor lurking behind my eyes…. I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife…. Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register
depression with me.... At certain times I have no race, I am me.... I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads. (Hurston, *Colored Me* 31)

Hurston declares that the “ills of slavery” or race will not be a determining factor to prove a woman’s worth. This sentiment is addressed in the works of other African American novelists such as the ones highlighted in this study and as well those who emerged after these authors. Novelists, such as Harper, Larsen, and Hurston were aware of the history of women and framed female characters who displayed the same determination present in real-life women. After Hurston’s proclamation of identity for the black female, Walker later voices the same struggles of women in history in her essay some forty years later.

“In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” outlines three types of black women: the physically and psychologically abused black woman, the black woman who is torn by contrary instincts, and the new black woman who recreates herself out of the creative legacy of her maternal ancestors (Howard 235-38). Although Walker names these female types in the essay and gives her female characters some of these attributes in her literary works, credit should be given to Zora Neale Hurston and her predecessors who provided the models for the black, female protagonist in the creation of Lola, Helga, and Janie. As Walker ends the essay, her words, which capture the female types and the evolution of the black female character in literature, epitomize the journey discussed in this writing as well. The poem reads in part: “They were women then/ My mamas generation/Husky of voice—Stout of / Step/ With fists as well as/Hands” (242). Walker concludes this section in her book with these words: “Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect
for strength-in search of my mother’s garden, I found my own” (243). These words from Walker signify the strength and longevity of women heroines throughout time.

The importance and influence of one generation’s strength and character upon the next is evident in the above words as well as displayed in the literary works of the women who penned them. Walker’s words seem to suggest that womanhood is a state that is evolutionary and is the result of knowledge gained from prior generations. The foremothers (identified as Frances E. W. Harper and Nella Larsen earlier in this study) before Hurston and Walker planted a seed that has developed into a garden full of rich, vivid depictions of black women’s lives seven decades later.

Through realistic events described in the texts that were basically historical in nature, the emergence and development of the black female protagonist influences modern literature. In fact, Walker uses Hurston’s model of the black female character in her novel, *The Color Purple* (1982). Walker adapts Hurston’s depiction of “individual and group suffering by black women” (Howard 69) in her portrayal of Miss Celie. In the novel, Celie, the protagonist, endures the individual hardships of controlling relationships, wifehood, and motherhood and gender oppression in the community as a part of her journey towards womanhood. Through her pain and suffering, Celie ultimately finds her voice through a friendship with her husband’s mistress and her long distance relationship (in thought only) with her sister. Since the dilemma of women’s traditional role in society and the individual’s urge to develop herself outside the bonds of motherhood and marriage is one that is still experienced by many women in America
today, Walker’s novel is significant in continuing the historical bond of women to gain strength from knowledge gained through their struggle experiences.

Walker’s work and the works of other female authors between the 1980s and 1990s began to show a commitment to the exploration of self as a central theme. Writers who were once marginalized by society have become some of the best contributors to the literature of this country. Alexis DeVeau sees “a greater and greater commitment among black women writers to understand self, multiplied in terms of the community, the community multiplied in terms of the nation, and the nation multiplied in terms of the world” (qtd. in Christian, Black Feminist Criticism, 171). The African American canon, as it exists currently, shows the commitment of female authors to appreciate the tradition from which they have come and the conflicts endured by their foremothers. Their understanding of the racism and sexism that existed in the early days in American history allows them to give voice to a time when women had no voice. Thus, the voices of the heroines Iola, Helga, and Janie as well as the body of work by Hurston, modern black female authors which include Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Morrison resound loudly that women’s voices are deserving to be heard, not only among a circle of women, but in a larger, more dominant circle of readers. This is evident in the works and ideas of writers after the 1890s. Readers are still able to recognize the process of self-definition and engagement in female characters’ lives. Common topics of motherhood, race relations, interpersonal relationships within one’s community or those established outside of the community do not overshadow or oversimplify the historical aspects of black women in America that were explored and portrayed in black female authors’ writings.
Gloria Naylor, author and educator, continued the theme of female self-actualization from the Harlem Renaissance in her 1982 novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*. Set on the fictional street Brewster Place, the novel chronicles the challenges and triumphs of seven women as they struggle to overcome obstacles that they face because of race, poverty, and relationships within the impoverished community. Collectively and individually, the women are able to tear down the brick wall that has literally and figuratively kept them from finding themselves and true happiness for many years. The symbolic breakthrough of the wall is representative of the same breakthrough required in the female quest toward self-actualization. Once the women of Brewster Place find the strength and courage to break free from the bondages that have bound them for years (which is very similar to the female characters discussed in this analysis), a drenching rain symbolically washes away the stains and opens the sky to new possibilities.

Believing that Naylor takes a feminist approach of writing in the novel, some critics compare Naylor to Toni Morrison. However, the connection between the female novelists discussed in this study and that of Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor is not necessarily feminist; instead, the connection is more womanist as defined by Alice Walker. "‘Womanist,’ according to Walker, is described as ‘outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior.’ Emphasis should be place on the word ‘willful’ because for so long, so many black women have not been considered to be in possession of their own free wills…” (Saunders 11). Yet, the female characters in all of the literary works discussed in this and previous chapters are “willful” women who exhibit the qualities outlined by Walker above. Soon after Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor published their
works, Toni Morrison began developing the black female protagonist further and closed the gap even more between the wandering woman searching for self and the “willful” women who sought her place in still a male dominated society.

Toni Morrison’s novels emerge in the 1980s possessing some of the same elements of the female struggle towards identity that was present in the works of Harper through Walker. Morrison’s early protagonists in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) are troubled by images of beauty based upon white standards, loveless relationships, and gender inequality, which are some of the same issues that the early novelists’ protagonists experienced. Morrison’s main character, Pecola Breedlove, unsuccessfully struggles to find herself based upon unrealistic standards for a black girl because she is unable to reconcile the perfect image with her actual face.

Continuing to portray historical elements in fiction that shape the female characters based upon historical events, Terri McMillan entered the literary scene in the 1990s. Her black female literary characters’ qualities expanded to include the more successful, self-sufficient, and self-assured black woman who had a career, but they still lacked the flourishing relationship with the black male. Terri McMillan’s success with *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1996) is in part due to the extent to which the female character mirrors the modern day female. A contrast from the other characters who are seeking self-actualization, McMillian’s characters defy the stereotypical view of African American women from historical perspectives.

As a result of the publication and acceptance of these authors’ works came the empowerment and acceptance of all African American female authors and the movement
that today liberates both authors and readers to fully express themselves as wives, mothers, and women of significance in society. The novels defined the beauty and the power of women, and the fact remains that today’s women can most likely credit the significant works and the female authors who unabashedly let the world know that women could be proud of the strides made throughout history and of the ultimate accomplishments recorded in the annals of time. Toni Morrison, who was asked in an interview why she distanced herself from feminism, replied, “I don’t subscribe to patriarchy, and I don’t think it should be subscribed within matriarchy. I think it’s a question of equitable access and opening doors to all sorts of things” (Jaffrey 5). Morrison’s words annihilated the remaining boundaries hindering black, female authors and the doors of literary canon for black women had been opened.

Implications

As this literary study of African American female protagonists concludes, it is important to note that the authors discussed within this analysis not only have established a genre of interest to black readers, but one that can be enjoyed by persons of various ethnic groups as well. Harper, Larsen, and Hurston were the pioneers of a movement that spurred the development of the black, female character as well as the black, female author. Their stories (which contained elements of fact and fiction) were largely based upon the historical aspects of black women in America, their personal experiences, and storytelling which is an important method for relaying information in the African American culture. Although the works discussed were not autobiographical, the authors shared much of their own experiences to craft the female characters as they consistently
search for what seems to be elusive for them—their identity and voice. Through their characters, the female authors authenticated their self-worth and the worth of so many other women. Because of their stories, a new age of literature was born to celebrate the lives of the black female in literature. The female protagonist evolved from the outcry of the infamous words of Sojourner Truth and from her speech entitled, "Ain’t I a Woman," in the 1800s and rebelled against Janie’s “mule uh da world” in the 1930s to become characters with a presence and a voice that appear in more recent works. The female author’s platform, and thus the black female characters’ plight, has also transformed from the printed pages of Frances E. W. Harper’s Iola Leroy to other media such as film. The motion picture industry has showcased the works of black female authors such as Alice Walker’s The Color Purple as well as Terry McMillan’s Waiting to Exhale and How Stella Got Her Groove Back. Television was used to present the novels of Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God and Gloria Naylor’s The Women of Brewster Place as movie adaptations formatted for the small screen.

The novels written since the 1930s make poignant implications of the progress of the black female characters. Harper’s success with Iola Leroy began repairing and reshaping the definition of black womanhood. Harper’s progressive views of blacks and women expressed in the character of Iola Leroy were emulated to some extent in the next generation of novels. It is Harper’s courage and determination that helped authors and literary audiences see the impact of the wittings of Harper, Larsen, and Hurston as they portrayed the black, female’s progression from sexual and physical slavery to the “joy of independence” (Kaiser 97). Faced with dual oppression as a black person and a female
living in America, the black woman has always been faced with being a woman in a sexist society, yet she has triumphed in life and in literature. The black, female character defied the rigid cultural, political, and professional boundaries that women faced to emerge as a feeling, spiritual being whose complex nature makes her more than meets the eye. She is the epitome of womanhood in modern society.

Because of the long list of literary matriarchs discussed in this study, I, along with other readers today and tomorrow, can look forward to and anticipate the maturation of the African American female characters who will continue to be nurtured and cultivated as Alice Walker's "garden" as history continues to unfold. Modern writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Terry McMillan have continued to pave the way and have broken barriers for black and female writers of other ethnicities in literature as a result of the audacity of the early works of Frances E. W. Harper, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston.
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*Eyes Were Watching God.* *Black Feminist Criticism and Critical Theory.*


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