

Familial Characterization in Zora Neale Hurston's *Spunk*

Fatemeh Azizmohammadi¹ and Nasser Mahmoudi²

¹Department of English Literature, Arak Branch, Islamic Azad University, Arak, Iran

²Department of Persian Literature, Shoushtar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shoushtar, Iran

Abstract: Hurston's motives for presenting black folklore were, in part, political. She wanted to refute contemporary claims that African Americans lacked a distinct culture of their own. Her novels depict the unconscious creativity of the African American proletariat or folk. They represent community members participating in a highly expressive communication system which taught them to survive racial oppression and, moreover, to respect themselves and their community. Hurston also had a psychological motive for presenting black folk culture. She drew the folk materials for her literary works from the rural, southern black life she knew as a child and subsequently recorded in folklore-collecting trips in the late 1920's and 1930's. She had fond memories of her childhood in the all-black town of Eatonville, where she did not experience poverty or racism. This Study attempts to examine familiar characterization. The stories selected for study here ' are from the book entitled *Spunk*. They are *Spunk*, *Isis*, *Muttsy*, *Sweet*, and *The Gilded Six Bits*.

Keywords: Familiar Characterization, Zora Neale Hurston, *Spunk*, *Isis*, *Muttsy*, *Sweet*, *the Gilded Six Bits*

1. Introduction

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the short story as a genre passed through various stages of evolution. French, German and Russian influences helped center the focus of the socio-realistic portrayal of characters. In Russia, Gogol heightened this portraiture by evolving the folk tale within the short story. In America, Irving's sentimental approach, Poe's sensational presentations and the didactic tone of Hawthorne's short stories caused a reactionary wave (Reid 1979:25). This in turn paved the way for regionalist and pastoral vignettes in fiction. They were woven into the stories with a mixture of psychological subtlety and humor. In such a literary climate were heard the hitherto repressed voices of various ethnic writers. Powerful and authentic among these were the voices of Black writers who formed "The Harlem Renaissance." Among the writers of this exotic upheaval was Zora Neale Hurston (1901-1969) who was dwarfed, as it were, by the great writers of the 1920s - Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen on one side and on the other by the writers of the 1940s - Richard Wright, Frank Yerby, Ann Petry and Willard Motley (Turner 1971:99). Zora Neale Hurston was the first prolific black woman writer. A versatile genius, she was novelist, short story writer, anthropologist; writer of four novels, two collections of folklore, an autobiography and several short stories. A pioneer in many fields she attempted creations in drama and music. Hurston's short stories were the early works which brought her to the attention of Charles S. Johnson, the father of the Harlem Renaissance. The purview of

¹ *Corresponding author: Fatemeh Azizmohammadi, Department of English Literature, Arak Branch, Islamic Azad University, Arak, Iran. E-mail: F-azizmohammadi@iau-arak.ac.ir. Tel: +98 09366612714

this study is to gain deeper insights into the characters that fill her short stories. The stories selected for study here ' are from the book entitled *Spunk*. They are "Spunk," "Isis," "Muttsy," "Sweet," and "The Gilded Six Bits."

2. Familial Characterization in Zora Neale Hurston's *Spunk*

In the short stories she projects the most common of human encounters - the familial situation stressing neither the male nor the female role but the importance of the family. The families are those of rural people in their day-to-day life and in mundane situations. When she depicts urban life, it is as a hostile and unwelcome agent that threatens the serenity of pastoral life. Making use of this climatic background she places the characters within the negative and positive outlook of the familial circle. The characters are earthbound and seem to reflect the hiatus in the familial circle. These gaps are caused by lack of concordant view of life arid marriage. The two outlooks of life and the local-color produce a series of amazing portraits of wives, husbands, fathers, children, grandmothers and mothers-in-law.

The first story "Spunk" was written in 1925 and won the "Opportunity" literary contest. Joe Kanty, Lena's first husband, is no match for her aggressive and sinewy lover Spunk. Lena is the erring wife. She parades the streets with her lover. The story is presented in a dramatic fashion with the community acting as chorus. It watches and comments on the vicissitudes of Joe and Lena. She has openly rejected her marital status and has left her whining husband in order to live with Spunk. Lena is no wavering or frail woman. She has her own standards of value. She refuses Spunk's offer of a house: "'Thass mah house' Lena speaks up. 'Papa give me that'" (Hurston 1985:4). On the other hand it is the community which has to nag her husband into action. In an unbelievable spurt of courage, Joe armed with a razor attacks Spunk who has a gun on him. Spunk kills Joe. The killing does not ruffle him for "Spunk turned on his heel and sauntered away to where he knew his love wept in fear for him and no man stopped him" (*ibidem* :5). Having cleared the way, he marries Lena and steps into the role of a second husband. Like the marriage of Janie and Tea Cake in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston 1969), it is a short lived union for the marriage comes to an abrupt end with the death of Spunk. The community and Spunk are unanimous in their mythic belief that Joe Kanty in the form of a black bob-cat had pushed Spunk to his death in the saw-mill.

Sex, race and class had interacted to produce and project the black woman as a "Stereotyped woman" with no mind of her own. Lena Kanty is a far cry from such a figure. She is a determined woman and gets what she wants. She refuses to live on Spunk but at the same time she is not prepared to live as wife to Joe Kanty. The story opens with the broken familial circle. The breaks are perhaps caused through the lack of shared interests and outlook. Having drifted apart, the husband appears as a total stranger to her. Hurston's characterization of Lena shocks the reader into surprise.

Joe Kanty is portrayed as a helpless husband with no identity of his own. He neither knows the way to win the affections of his wife nor does he have the initiative to threaten the aggressor Spunk. The community seems to justify Lena's choice of Spunk, though they do not sanction her rejection of Joe, who is sad, nervous and jittery. His unexpected sportive efforts only culminate in his death. Nemesis in the guise of myth and folklore takes revenge and kills Spunk. Lena loses both husbands within the space of a short period. At the end the village sits wondering who could be Lena's next. The story has no end; the written page stops with these conjectures throwing a projected look into the future. Perhaps no husband can really possess Lena. Or is she yet to meet a husband who will reciprocate and complement her personality and make the familial into a circle of love? The reader is left with many a question.

"Muttsy" is Hurston's sole attempt at the urban milieu. The story is an exegesis on the beginnings of a family and focuses on the determinate and protective attitude of the husband. Muttsy before his marriage

was the acclaimed gambler in three states. He is infatuated with Pinkie Jones' beauty and seeming helplessness. The other women of pleasure fade into insignificance beside Pinkie Jones. She is fragile but very self-determined. She is horrified to hear that Muttsy was in her room while she was in a drunken stupor. Like the women in James Baldwin's fiction, for her, wedlock is the only honorable position in which she can accept the protection and support of Muttsy. He sees that she will never consent to be one of his pickup women: "He ain't gain' to make me one of his women" (Hurstun 1985:34). She disappears for two whole weeks and he searches for her. He explains and he "must have been very convincing for at 125th Street they entered a taxi that headed uptown again. Muttsy was smiling amiably upon the whole round world" (*ibidem* :36).

Muttsy, the new husband, tries to please his sweet little wife in every way. He has a regular job as supervisor of stevedores. The dice are not seen. He stays clear of them and attends to his job. An idyllic life of happiness follows. After a month, he meets his friend Blue Front who mocks his ego with a boast that he has proclaimed himself king of the dice in Muttsy's place. Muttsy is on the rebound. His resolves fly to the wind as he challenges Blue Front: "Mah wrist ain't got no cramp 'cause ah'm married" (*ibidem*). The dice flies and the gambler surfaces and is once more on the prowl. "What man can't keep one li'l wife an', two li'l bones" (*ibidem*:3?). The story ends with the beginning of his return to the kingdom of dice-rolling. Has Pinkie's influence lost its hold or is it the eagerness of a young husband to keep his wife in luxury that draws him back to the dice? Perhaps Muttsy's return to gambling will in no way affect the familial relationship. Hurston describes Muttsy and Pinkie's relationship before marriage. Hurston's characterization stops there and we are faced with another open-ended situation.

In her next story "Sweat," familial relationships are once again portrayed through a black couple, Delia Jones and her husband Sykes. They have crossed fifteen years of marriage and are now tasting its bitter dregs. He is a tyrant, a womanizer and a parasite. Robert Bone (1975) categorizes "Sweat" as a fantasy of revenge. Locked in deadly hatred the couple is estranged in both mind and body. In his present parasitical state, Sykes further degrades himself by his sadistic and brutal bullying of his wife. In Delia Jones is reflected what Nanny in Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* calls the "mule of the world" (Hurstun 1969:29) theory. It is a picture of the black woman oppressed by the cuter world and by the black male. Since Sykes, the husband, refuses to be the breadwinner, Delia becomes a washer-woman to the whites. He spends most of his time chasing fleshy women and picks up Bertha. The village describes her as an unattractive woman who looks like a piece of liver with hair. She widens the breach between the husband and the wife.

Delia was an attractive woman when she married Sykes. Men remember her as a little dotted puppy but the beating and the hard work have made her into a knotty and muscled woman. She is wise now to the ways of her husband and a slow change is creeping into her. Her docility has left her. There is a great void in her and now the emotional winds of religion and the methodical system of washing clothes fill her being. The very house seems to reek of the "Sweat" of her labor and fear.

Sykes is vociferous in his drunken cant against his wife's religion and her washing. He scatters the linen in an angry and vituperative mood. There is no love-tolerant relationship here because the couple has never understood each other. The marriage has celebrated its demise and the partners have ceased hoping for a positive outcome. The absence of love has made hate seep through the house and search for an outlet to relieve mounting pressure. Emotions therefore run high in the house. Delia is physically strong enough to bear the brunt of hard work, but her emotive tenseness is strung to a high pitch. Capitalizing on this, her husband makes her nervous. Pleasing Bertha is his aim. In order to get rid of Delia and install Gertha in Delia's house, he rears a rattlesnake.

Delia is hysterical with terror and pleads with him to remove it from the house but the rattler stays on. Surprisingly as the days pass and her aversion of Sykes increases, the rattler's chalky white fangs seem to mesmerize her. One day she finds the rattler's box empty. She is paralyzed with fear to discover the snake in her work basket. In terror she flees the house. Waiting outside she sees her husband go into the house. He hears the rattler but in the darkness he is confused. The snake strikes him and she hears his cries of pain, but she has become a body of steel. He sees her and calls out to her but she does not help him. Religion comes too late to him. "Mah Gawd from Heben" (Hurstun 1985:52) he cries out; " ... she knew the cold river was creeping up and up to extinguish that eye which must know by now that she knew" (*ibidem*:53).

Delia has lost her identity as a wife. The years have wrought a slow change but the arrival of the snake accelerated her hate into a blind cruelty. This is also due to the fact that the revenge-hate relationship of the husband and wife had already annulled the marriage of Sykes and Delia. It was a union of two unlike creatures - Sykes with his sadism and sexual hunger pitted against a passive and weak wife, who later becomes as cruel as the rattler which kills her husband.

Sykes bears the title of husband but in reality he is an egotistic and degenerate man, a rake and a rover. His wily nature boomerangs on him. The rattler meant for his wife deceives him of his life. His death is surrounded by surprise, pain and horror. Delia is left in a state of freedom. If the husband disgusts by his life pattern, the wife shocks the reader by her metamorphosis. "The Gilded Six Bits" is a story of familial warmth and innocence. Conjugal happiness touches on the mythical as the young couple cavort and play and surprise each other. Joe, a laborer, adores his wife Missie May. Love is reciprocated and there is a partnership of love. Their happiness is too exotic to be maintained at such a high emotive level. The rift in the family comes with the entry of Otis Slemmons and the infidelity syndrome breaks upon the unsuspecting husband when he becomes aware of the alien in his bedroom.

Instantly the loving husband fades and a phantasmal being takes his place. He laughs, but it is not the ringing happy laughter. In his tussle with the male explorer, a gold piece has come off in his hand. This was the bait that had entangled his wife. Her husband punishes her by placing it in front of her each time she renders him a service. Her longing for it now turns into a deep loathing. It seems to bite into her very psyche, when she finds that it is only a gilt coin. To her, it becomes a symbol of her false values. Her husband cannot tolerate the idea of an erring wife, yet his love for her makes him stay on. The punishment and estrangement lasts for three months. He falls ill and when she ministers to him, youth triumphs and she is happy. Her joy vaporizes when she discovers the piece of money under her pillow the next morning. Then she realizes that as part of her punishment he was treating her as if she were a piece of bought flesh.

She leaves his house unable to bear the label of a whore. Her love for him makes her realize her foolishness. But a mysterious conversation takes place between her mother-in-law and herself and she returns home. Seeing her chopping wood he becomes alive to a new fact. "Ah ain't blind you makin' feet for shoes" (*ibidem*:66). She gives birth to a baby who is his spitting image. Here Hurstun reaches beyond the husband and wife into the interior of the family. The mother-in-law, Joe's mother, assures him of the baby's parentage and resemblance. The baby unites the broken family and once more the house rings with laughter and happiness. The husband is strong enough to punish his wife. But he shields her from punishment from the outside world. He does not reveal his predicament to his mother, though he seems to value her judgement. A weight is taken off his shoulder when his mother tells him that the baby is his. Like his wife he made a wrong choice in admiring Otis Slemmons, and in punishing his wife, Joe too shares her punishment. His fidelity and forgiveness are an element of surprise, for the reader expects him to be more vituperative as a betrayed man.

From a loving, youthful wife, Missie May is suddenly transformed into a transgressor, a penitent and then a mother. The line that trails through all stages is the love the husband and wife share. This pulls them through. Parentage with its new responsibilities brings them into a closer understanding and caring. Now there is better knowledge of the values of life, for they have grown and expanded within this experience. "Isis" is the story of a little girl and her family. She is afraid of her grandmother and frequently wants to run away and die. In her dreams she seems to be the victor riding white horses and wearing trailing robes and golden slippers tipped with blue. She is filled with the joy of living. Her grandmother is the only being who can repress her and mould her into her idea of an ideal black woman. Dancing comes naturally to Isis, "hand on hip, flower between her teeth with the red and white fringe of the tablecloth Grandma's new red tablecloth that she wore in lieu of a Spanish shawl trailing in the dust ..." (*ibidem* :15).

The father is mentioned only in passing and the mother is absent in this familial circle but the matriarchal presence of the grandmother is felt in every turn of the story. She presides as the guardian of the house and the little family. She is an economical old woman with an eye for all details in the running of a house. Her portrait is a realistic presentation perfect even to the minute detail of an afternoon nap. Grievances are carried to the father but instant decisions and punishments are meted out by her. In the midst of reprisals, domestic matters go on in the backyard, the yard is raked, the puppy plays and the kitchen cutlery is washed.

A very natural portrayal of ordinary life is an ordinary home. Humorous scenes are enacted inside the house. The grandchildren try to shave their sleeping grandmother for Isis feels very sad for grandma's hairy chin. It is astonishing that the grandmother has been able to house-break this indefatigable spirit. Isis is lovable not only because of, but also despite all her impish behavior. She spans the ethnic chasm through the buoyancy of a child's spirit. Her light envelopes all alike. Hurston's characterization and structures prove that the short story can indeed move to a height of intense feeling. The overt thematics relate to familial relationships among blacks and emphasize interactions among family members ranging from children to grandmother. In each story they are presented with a difference that is unique in each situation. Roles are repetitious since the portrait is of familial relationships. They project varied and diversified personalities that" are laid open with stark realism. Interwoven with the plots are elements of ethnic background, native colloquialisms, familial circles, and mythic beliefs. The most frequently portrayed characters are husbands and wives who face friction because they either overplay their roles through unwarranted domination, or are out in search of more exciting sex, thus bringing about unhappiness in the family.

Howard's (1980:71) criticism is that in the unsuccessful marriages, Hurston treats the male very harshly. He is killed and the woman left free to enter into a new matrimonial relationship. This is what happens to Lena in "Spunk." In "Sweat" the rattlesnake kills Joe leaving Delia Jones a free woman. In "The Gilded Six Bits" she treats the erring wife with great leniency.

Howard dissects Hurston's characterization unmercifully. She argues that the characters suffer in the familial circle because they lack the ingredients that make living happy, Lack of love and understanding and, above all, a willingness to negotiate differences are missing. The children Hurston portrays are of black parentage with no trace of miscegenation. The two children Isis (in "Isis") and the baby born to Joe and Missie May (in "The Gilded Six Bits") are bringers of light and joy. "Isis" holds an autobiographical reflection of Hurston's childhood and of her relationship to her grandmother.

The realism of the portrayal within the framework of the stories exhibits the psychodynamics of her creativity as a writer. Hurston has brought into being a literature of commitment and identity. Peacock (1972:15-21) explains that such a literature will be created when writers write on particular subjects and

themes which hold their interest because they relate to their conflicts or deep emotional or philosophical reactions.

The stories celebrate blackness in various tones. They are enacted in a self-contained black world. The characters converse in black-lingual tones. Xenophobia had crushed the blacks in the past, but the Harlem writers celebrated their blackness through local color fiction. The pastoral element is placed on a superior level and Hurston portrays the triumph of the rural over the urban values of living. At times, in "Muttsy" a picaresque note enters, which seems to say "let's be away from it all." Robert Bone's (1975:144) criticism is that in her characterization an intense portraiture is sometimes spoiled by the projection of a very shallow world. Nearly all her plots center on transgressors in middle class Negro families. Conflict between the characters is therefore the norm. Like a spiritual hermaphrodite Hurston combines a man's scope and a woman's sensitivity in her characterization. It is inevitable that her style is naturalistic.

To paint realities and not illusions -- this was the burden of Strindberg, and Ibsen, as it was of Zola's scientifically based determinism, and Hauptmann's portrayal of working class conditions. Writers using this style made a gesture, saying: *this* is the truth of things, of men's lives, or their moral attitudes, or their biologically determined character. The response of the reader is to say: yes, you have shown me things that I know are the truth (Peacock 1972:90).

This is the truth portrayed by Zora Neale Hurston, presented through her characterization and emphasized in the open-endedness of her stories.

3. References

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